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# THE TECHNIQUE OF THE ONE-ACT PLAY

## A Study in Dramatic Construction

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JOHN W. LUCE AND COMPANY  
BOSTON : : : : : 1918





## PREFACE

THE One-act play is with us and is asking for consideration. Theatre managers, stage designers, devotees of the drama, actors, dramatists, and University professors recognize its presence. It is to be noted, too, that no apology is being offered for the better sort of contemporary One-act plays. As a matter of fact, none is needed. They justify themselves as worth-while studies of human life and human character. Without adequate first-hand acquaintance with the fundamentals of life, they cannot be written any more than can the three-act form. The One-act play is no longer to be dismissed with a careless wave of the hand. It has come to be a fact in contemporary dramatic expression.

The writing of this volume has been prompted by two things. One is the conviction that the principles of writing the One-act play can be taught with a large measure of profit to the earnest playwright; and the other is the strong belief that the devotee of the drama will welcome a volume dealing with a study of the prin-

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ciples of dramaturgy as operative in the shorter dramatic product.

The materials of these chapters have come directly out of the lectures and the laboratory work of a course in Writing the One-act play as conducted in the University of Utah, and out of a rather careful analysis of more than three hundred of the contemporary shorter form of drama. In no case has the author wished to be arbitrarily dogmatic; yet it has been necessary, for purposes of emphasis, to state precepts with a firmness born of conviction. Moreover, experience in conducting work in play-writing in the University lecture room has led the author to feel that a *purpose* and a definite *intent*, not a *rule*, are the real guides and motive forces in the writing of any kind of play.

Indebtedness for valuable aid is hereby acknowledged to colleagues in the Department of English in the University of Utah. To Louis W. Larsen and L. A. Quivey, to Professors A. S. Bennion and George M. Marshall, appreciation is due for their having materially lightened the labor of revision of the manuscript. To Professor O. J. P. Widtsoe, Head of the Department, is due acknowledgment of valuable aid in the matter of structure. Expression of appreciation is also due to Professor George Q. Coray, Professor of Anthropology and Sociol-

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ogy, and to Professor George Snoddy, Professor of Psychology, for their helpful criticism of several chapters.

B. ROLAND LEWIS.

Salt Lake City,  
September 1, 1918.



**To**  
**The Men and Women of the University of Utah**  
**Whose Interest in the Writing of the One-Act Play**  
**Has Made this Volume Possible**



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# TECHNIQUE OF THE ONE-ACT PLAY

## CHAPTER I

### THE CASE OF THE ONE-ACT PLAY

#### THE ONE-ACT PLAY AS A DRAMATIC TYPE

STUDENTS of literature and of life are quite agreed that both the subject-matter and the technique of any literary product are often very largely determined by the prevailing social conditions of the period during which it has been produced. There is frequently prevailing mode and convention in literary activity quite as much as there is in the current social decorum. To-day it is not the three-act play nor the five-act play that is the centre of interest in dramatic expression: it is the *One-act play*,—not a new form of course, but one that, despite unsympathetic animadversion, challenges attention.

Theatre managers, the general theatre-going public, actors, playwrights, and even the professors in the University, recognize its presence. It is to be observed, too, that no apology is

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being offered for the better sort of contemporary One-act plays, and indeed none is needed. They justify themselves as worthwhile studies of human life and character. Their effectiveness as a form of dramatic expression is their own justification for being. They cannot be written, any more than can the three-act form, without adequate first-hand acquaintance with life. A good many lack dramatic style and value—and so do many of the longer plays—but a surprisingly large number possess them. The One-act play can no longer be dismissed, with a lofty wave of the academic hand, as of no consequence. It is with us; and it warrants being taken seriously.

The One-act play is claiming recognition as a specific dramatic type. The short-story, and likewise the novel, was once an embryo and an experiment; but no enlightened person, nowadays, would care to hold that it has not developed into a worthy literary type. Its popularity is attested by the fact that most of the contemporary fiction writers have essayed it. This shorter form of fiction was once apologetic, and that not so many years ago; but it has come unto its own and now enjoys the recognition of being a distinctive type of prose narrative. What the One-act play asks is not an advocate or a defender. It asks opportunity for development! Its possibilities are as

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much greater than the short-story as the drama is greater than the novel. The One-act play is no longer wholly an experiment; it is succeeding in high places. And the signs of the times are that at a date not far distant, perhaps already arrived, this form of drama will stand erect and take its place among the significant types of literary expression.

It is either lack of acquaintance with the One-act play or lack of sympathy for the unconventional, though ever so worthy, in drama that some students of dramatic art have failed to appreciate the real nature and value of this shorter form. Five years ago the One-act play was not so conspicuous as it is now; hence there may have been reason for William Archer's saying, in his book on Play-Making where he discusses the routine of composition, "Go-as-you-please composition may be possible for the novelist, perhaps even for the writer of a one-act play, a mere piece of dialogue, etc." Nothing could be more unsympathetic and more from the point than this. If the One-act play, in its better form, is anything at all it is not "go-as-you-please composition" and is not "a mere piece of dialogue." "But the one-act play," says Walter Prichard Eaton, "has an obvious right to existence, as much as the short-story, and there are plentiful proofs that it can be terse, vivid and significant." Again, he

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holds, "It is the one-act play in our country to-day—which will bear the most watching for signs of imagination and for flashes of insight and interpretative significance." Sir James M. Barrie's "The Twelve-Pound Look," Marion Craig Wentworth's "War Brides," Fenn and Price's "'Op-o'-Me-Thumb," William Butler Yeats's "The Hour-Glass," Zona Gale's "Neighbors," Paul Hervieu's "Modesty," August Strindberg's "Facing Death," Edward Goodman's "Eugenically Speaking," Lord Dunsany's "The Glittering Gate" and "The Lost Silk Hat," George Cram Cook and Susan Glaspell's "Suppressed Desires," Alice Gerstenberg's "Overtones," and many others that could well be listed, are not "go-as-you-please composition" and are not "a mere piece of dialogue."

The One-act play is not merely a thing of practice for the amateur and the novice. A critic of no mean value, in a current volume on play-writing, has asserted that the One-act play offers the amateur the easiest opportunity for testing his skill, and that the time and the labor involved in its composition is perhaps less than a fourth or a fifth of that demanded for a five-act drama. "Beginners," he says, "will do well to practise the various forms of composition in the brief sketch, before venturing upon the full fledged play." It is quite well known that some good plays have been written in a

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few days, others have required months and even years of arduous labor. Some novels have been quickly composed; whereas some short-stories have required the undivided attention of the author for weeks and months. The time element for composing a One-act play, or any other form of literature, is wholly relative; and comparisons of any kind are invidious. Those who have written One-act plays give ample testimony that their composition is not a matter of time but a matter as serious and important as the composition of any other form. And to recommend to amateurs that they try out their powers by practising with the One-act form with the view that the One-act piece is only a stepping-stone to the three-act form, is only to reveal one's ignorance of the constructive problem involved in the shorter type of dramatic composition. In individual cases, no doubt the advice is sound; but to urge it as a general recommendation is to relegate the One-act play into a category where it does not belong. There is not a writer of the short-story, with all its richness of subject-matter and technical excellence, but would resent any insistence that the prospective novelist would do well to begin on the short-story as a stepping-stone to novel-writing. The short-story is a distinctive type unto itself, and proficiency therein is no guarantee of a similar result in the

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novel if the one is to be used as apprenticeship for the other. Here again comparisons are futile. Indeed, the One-act play, like the short-story, is a type unto itself; and to suggest that the prospective playwright use the One-act play only as a thing on which to practise before attempting the larger form, is, in but exceptional individual cases, almost an insult to the type.

Another writer of a recent volume on dramaturgy, in a chapter on the One-act play, says that as used in the theatre to-day such plays may roughly be divided "into curtain-raisers, vaudeville sketches, and a third class suitable for amateur theatricals." It is granted that "playlets" and "dramatic skits"—for several centuries too—have frequently been used thus, and that they are still being used in a number of places. But there has come into existence a number of One-act plays that are *not* curtain raisers, *not* vaudeville sketches, and *not* material merely for amateur theatricals. The mere fact that a good One-act play does appear in these capacities is in itself no evidence against the play of lack of value. Indeed, many contemporary first-class One-act plays do reach these places and some have their origin in these ways; but there is also a conspicuous group that have not had their origin in vaudeville as such and have not appeared in more or less untoward places. On the contrary, they have

been presented in high-places successfully and have, again and again, received the plaudits of the multitude. The day when the One-act play is to be used only as a "curtain-raiser," an "after-piece," a "vaudeville skit," or "amateur theatricals," is rapidly coming to an end; not that they will never again appear there but that they are coming unto their own even as the short-story has come unto its own. Hermann Sudermann's "Fritschen," Fenn and Price's "'Op-o'-Me-Thumb," Paul Hervieu's "Modesty," Anton Tchekov's "A Marriage Proposal," Sir James M. Barrie's "The Twelve Pound Look," John Millington Synge's "Riders to the Sea," are not necessarily conventional vaudeville material; they are fore-runners and examples of what gives promise of being a significant dramatic product of a not far-off future.

To-day, the greatest obstacles to the One-act play are the conventions of the stage and of the longer forms of dramatic writing. The conventional objection that an audience cannot easily adjust itself to the changing scenes of a bill of One-act plays for an evening's performance is ridiculous and not founded on psychological fact. One has yet to hear a music-lover report that he was unable to appreciate a concert of miscellaneous numbers because he could not adjust himself psycholog-



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ically to the various parts of the programme. The auditor unconsciously adjusts himself, and that, too, without any loss of appreciation. Any theory to the contrary is not true to human experience. Again, so far as careful observation and detailed inquiry can determine, no vaudeville audience experiences any difficulty in adjusting itself to the various acts of a variety bill. A theatre audience has something of the characteristics of a crowd, and, as such, is always wholly receptive to any stimulus, varied and changing though it be. Vaudeville stunts are usually so complete in themselves and often constructed with such artistry that each part has the effect of completeness in itself; accordingly, the mind has no difficulty in adjusting itself to each one of the acts as it is presented. Whatever bit of shock there may be at the beginning of a following number, it is soon forgotten in the emotional response to the matter immediately in hand. Even in a long play of three or five acts, between which there are the respective intermissions and interruptions, one experiences little difficulty in readjusting oneself at the rise of each curtain; and this is true not only in plays in which the story is not told in direct sequence of events, but also in plays between the acts of which there are often long lapses of time. One-act plays, when well done, are masterpieces of technical

construction; they are individual and complete units; and an audience, receptive in mind rather than reflective and active, makes adjustment to any change with little conscious effort. Indeed, the objection to an evening bill of One-act plays, on the ground that a theatre group is not able easily to adjust itself to the several plays, is a make-believe and conventional one. It is not true to the psychological facts in the case, and human experience disproves it, all pedantic theories to the contrary notwithstanding.

Another objection made to the One-act play is the conventional one that it is too small to be of any value. Too frequently literary critics have been almost obsessed with the idea that bigness or large complexity are the first criteria by which a given product shall be judged. Indeed, Milton is known by his "Paradise Lost," not by his "Comus" and minor poems; Dante, by his "Divina Commedia" and not by his supposedly minor products. The sympathetic student, however, knows that in many cases the really superior values do not always lie in the large products of a man of letters but often in the smaller and more highly artistic bits of work. Largeness of conception or bigness of structure are in themselves no guarantee of literary excellence. A literary product is essentially a work of art; whether

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it be wrought out on a large scale or on a small one is quite another matter. The lyric is quite as much an art form as is the epic. The cameo is as much an art product and has as much claim to be recognized as has the statue; the etching is often superior in art values to the larger painting; the short-story is as much a literary type as is the larger novel; and the One-act play must not be lightly thrown aside just because it happens to be smaller than the three-act form. Art of any kind must not be judged in the light of the cult of mere bigness.

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The One-act play, then, needs no apology for its being. In its finished and more significant form it is not a "playlet," nor a "sketch," nor a so-called "skit," nor a play that is merely short. These seldom or never aim at a definite and unmistakable unity either in purpose or in construction; they are not art. On the other hand, the One-act play has for its end a singleness of impression—a definite artistic effect. The One-act form is to the longer dramatic piece what the highly developed short-story is to the novel. In either case, the two forms have much in common, but the shorter types, because of their greater economy of means and material, are more intent upon pro-

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ducing the singleness of effect so characteristic of their function.

A One-act play is not necessarily short. Usually it is rather short because it presents but a single dramatic situation or crisis and because it aims at a singleness of effect in comparatively short compass. While economy of material and of time are always considerations, the length of the One-act piece depends very largely upon the nature of the dramatic situation with which it deals. To handle it most effectively may require fifteen pages or fifty, the performance thereof may require thirty minutes or the larger part of an hour. The length of the One-act form is wholly relative. If the playwright, in constructing his play, keeps in mind that with but a few characters and with but a single situation wrought out to a crucial moment and that with the greatest economy of material and means, he is to secure a definite and single dramatic effect, the length of the play will not go far wrong. The material and purpose of Sir James M. Barrie's "The Twelve-Pound Look" are somewhat different from those of Mary Aldis's "Extreme Unction"; the former requires some forty pages for its handling while the latter needs but a scarce fifteen; and, in the performance thereof, the one acts for the better part of an hour, whereas the other is complete

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within thirty or thirty-five minutes,—yet both are unmistakably good One-act plays. The One-act form, therefore, is not circumscribed by a more or less definite and conventional time limit as is the three-act form.

Technically considered, the One-act play is just as much a distinctive dramatic problem as is the longer form. In either case, the playwright aims so to handle his material as to provoke interest and emotional response from the audience. Since the one form is characteristically shorter than the other and since the one is, because of the shorter time and space at its disposal, obliged to exercise, to the highest degree, economy of material and of means, it follows that, while both may have much in common, the dramaturgy of the one is somewhat different from that of the other. The One-act form must, as it were, be presented in a “single sitting”; it must start at the beginning with certain definite elements and pass quickly and effectively to the end without a halt or a digression. In the three-act play there is often something of a break in the sequence. The longer form, composed as it is of three, four or five acts, is conceived in a series of units each one of which bears on the larger encompassing theme. Each act has its own dramatic value and likewise has its own dramatic relation to the whole play. In the case of the One-act

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piece, there is but one consideration—the material and method immediately in hand. To construct one building so as to procure a unified and artistic effect is one problem; and to construct several, each one of which is something of a problem in itself, and at the same time to arrange them in a group that will produce a unity of impression, is another and different consideration. The One-act play, like the short-story, has a technique characteristically its own.

Not only is the technical problem in the One-act form distinct from that of the three-act form, it is also, in many ways, more exacting and more difficult. The play must begin at once, and, with but a minimum of exposition, must get under way and move rapidly and effectively to a crucial moment, and must terminate at the psychologically opportune time. Though the time and space are relatively limited, the dramatic picture and situation must be complete in itself; there must be a singleness of impression. Whatever is done must be done quickly, deftly, and with a master hand. The One-act play is, at its best, the most finished, the most artistic, and the most closely wrought of dramatic forms. It thus manifests a higher art and perfection of technique than the longer play and equals the best drama in constructive excellence. Technique, therefore, is one of its

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prime considerations; and therein lies one of its difficult problems.

The One-act play is well-made or it is nothing at all. Drama of any kind, when really effective, is usually well-made. A careful analysis of Sir James M. Barrie's "The Twelve-Pound Look," Lord Dunsany's "The Lost Silk Hat," Paul Hervieu's "Modesty," George Cram Cook and Susan Glaspell's "Suppressed Desires," and William Butler Yeats's "The Hour-Glass," will reveal that these representative One-act plays are not only well-made but are also genuine art. A good One-act play is not a mere mechanical *tour de force*: mechanics and artistry it has of course, but it is also a bit of real dramatic art. A finished cameo is quite as much a work of art as is the finished statue; yet both have mechanics and design in their structure; and probably those of the cameo are more deft and more highly specialized than those of the full-sized statue, because the work has been done under more restricted conditions. The One-act play is to the longer dramatic form what the delicately wrought cameo is to the statue; and just in proportion as the cameo requires much more delicate workmanship than does the statue, so the One-act play must be well-made or the chances are that it will not be a genuine art product.

Naturally the material of the One-act form

is somewhat episodical. No whole life's story can be treated adequately, no complex plot can be entertained. Unlike the longer form, it shows not the whole man—except by passing hint—but a significant moment or experience, a significant character-trait. However vividly this chosen moment may be interpreted,—and the One-act play must be vivid,—much will still be left to the imagination. It is the aim of the One-act form to trace the causal relations of but one circumstance, so that this circumstance may be intensified and significant. The writer of the One-act play isolates so that he may throw the strong flash-light more searchingly on some one significant event, on some fundamental element of character, on some moving emotion. He deliberately presents in a vigorous, compressed, and suggestive way, a simplification and idealization of a particular part or aspect of life. He often opens but a momentary little vista of life, but it is so clear-cut and so significant that a whole life is often revealed thereby.

It must not be thought that because the One-act play deals with but one crisis or situation, it is weak and inconsequential; on the contrary, since only one event or situation can be emphasized, it follows that the writer is obliged to choose the one determining crisis which makes or mars the supreme struggle of a soul, the



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one great change or turning-point or end of a life-history. Such moments are the really vital material for drama; nothing affords more wonderful opportunity for striking analysis, for emotional stress, for the suggestion of a whole character sketched in the act of meeting its test. To segregate a bit of significant experience and to present a finished picture of its aspects and effects; to dissect a motive so searching and skilful that its very roots are laid bare; to detach a single figure from a dramatic sequence and portray a sketch of its character; to bring a series of actions into clear light in a sudden and brief human crisis; to tell a significant story briefly and with suggestion; to portray the humor of a person or an incident, or in a trice, to reveal the touch of tragedy resting like the finger of fate on an experience or on a character—these are some of the possibilities of the One-act play when handled by a master dramatist.

This shorter dramatic form, which is so effectively challenging attention, is cunningly wrought. In the hands of a novice it becomes weak and flabby; in the hands of a master workman it surpasses the short-story in value and possibilities. From first to last, it must be direct, concrete, highly concentrated, forceful, and closely wielded. Because of its strict technical requirements, it has developed a regular-

ity and definiteness of constructive technique almost unknown to the other dramatic forms. Nowhere else must the literary artist be so conscious of his method of workmanship as in the One-act play. Even the sonnet in its most perfect form does not surpass it. Economy of material and method and subtlety of treatment are essential to the singleness of effect sought. This constructive regularity of structure is, however, not a hindrance to beauty or to genuine power; all this but lends the charm of perfection. The sonnet and the cameo are admirable if for no other reason than their superior workmanship. The One-act play does not lose by any reason of its technical requirements; indeed this is one of its greatest assets and possibilities.

The One-act play is before us whether we will or no; it is presenting its claim for recognition as a specific dramatic form. Its possibilities are as much greater than those of the short-story as the drama is superior to the novel. At present the greatest obstacles to its full development and acceptance are the traditions and conventions of the longer dramatic form. Notwithstanding this, professional dramatists, actors, stage managers, and devotees of the drama have not hesitated to make use of the shorter form. Moreover, the zealous activities, in the One-act play, of high-class amateurs and

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semi-professionals in clubs, in Little Theatres, and in universities, are a most encouraging and healthful indication. The One-act play asks for but one thing,—opportunity for development!

## CHAPTER II

### THE DRAMATIST AND HIS AUDIENCE

#### RELATION BETWEEN THE DRAMATIST AND HIS PUBLIC

ANY ONE who has critically studied or has witnessed performances of such One-act plays as George Middleton's "Criminals," Marion Craig Wentworth's "War Brides," William Butler Yeats's "Cathleen ni Hoolihan," Hermann Sudermann's "Fritschen," August Strindberg's "Countess Julie," Anton Tchekov's "A Marriage Proposal," Zona Gale's "Neighbors," Giuseppe Giacosa's "The Wager," or George Cram Cook and Susan Glaspell's "Suppressed Desires," cannot but be impressed with their appropriateness in subject matter and in technique to the audiences for which they were written. The sentiments expressed, the motives revealed, the emotional values and the attitudes toward life portrayed, and likewise the methods of workmanship, are characteristic in each little play.

When Clayton Hamilton asserted that "A play is a story devised to be presented by actors

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on a stage *before an audience*",<sup>1</sup> he uttered a precept that must be taken seriously by every virile playwright, whether professional or amateur. The dramatist who is devising a story other than for presentation before an audience, is not writing a play in the practical dramaturgic sense; whatever else it may be, it is not a play. A play is a story of human life so conceived and so handled as to arouse the attention and to provoke the emotional response of a group of people who have assembled to witness a presentation of it. The materials that are put into a novel to be *read* by *individuals*, and the materials that are put into a play which is to *appeal* to a group of spectators are often very different matters; and the methods employed in either case are, likewise, essentially different. A thorough knowledge of the psychological characteristics of an assembled group and a sympathetic acquaintance with the basic emotions of human life are among the most important considerations for the playwright. He may, in part, ignore his public, or he may not make the most of his knowledge of its make-up; but to be wholly ignorant of it will spell failure to the practical aspect of his work.

The popular professional dramatist knows from experience that a knowledge of his audi-

<sup>1</sup> The italics are the author's.

ence is a fundamental asset in dramaturgy; the amateur, then, should, with sympathy and with zest, set himself to the task of understanding his public. He must ever keep in mind that he, as a playwright, is obliged to produce some kind of effect upon the assembled group; he is obliged to present material in such a way that it will provoke the very response that he desires to get. To know how to handle a story, to know how to produce a dramatic effect, is a very fundamental aspect of technique; but to know beforehand what kind of effect will coincide with the very life interests of the very audience for which he writes, demands that he know intimately the nature of the social group from which his hearers come. No matter what may be the dramatist's point of view, it must be remembered that the public has one too,—and it may not be the same one.

The amateur dramatist, however, must not take this to mean that he is at the absolute mercy of the passing changes and chance whims of a given social group. These are ephemeral fancies which may characterize any given audience. The dramatist, however, who really understands his craftsmanship is not led astray by the accidental tendencies of the day; but he does take note of those things which are vital in human activity, although manifestations of them oftentimes appear in aspects of the

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ephemeral and the exterior. Every active playwright, without being too free in their use, makes the most of the conventions and practices of the day; but the material of his drama, the stuff that is the source of his real effect, has to do with the deeper and more abiding forces which characterize human life and the very public for which he writes.

Though the dramatist must needs have an understanding of his fellow men, and must have toleration and above all sympathy with their interests and activities, and must ever consider the opinions and prejudices of the playgoers, he is under no undue strain when he does this. He, himself, is part and parcel of the very life which he portrays and reveals; he is a member of his own public, shares their likes and dislikes, and is characterized by the same traits, tendencies, and peculiarities. His interests are their interests; his humanity, their humanity; and his purpose as a dramatist is to reveal themselves to themselves. He must know thoroughly the very men and women whom he hopes to see flocking to the performance of his play. He can induce his public to attend only when he reveals to them those things with which they themselves have acquaintance and sympathy; and to do that he must have knowledge of the social group for which he writes.

## MOTIVES FOR THEATRE ATTENDANCE

The popular playwright cannot select his audience: he cannot go out into the byways and hedges and choose his hearers; he must submit his work before whosoever may come to see. On the whole, he does not and cannot appeal to the individual; he must appeal to the assembled group. Moreover, the assembled group is in a specific place—a theatre—traditionally known as a place for amusement. Accordingly, he has an audience of all classes and conditions of men and women before him, who have come to the play for many and various reasons.

Careful surveys have shown that by far the largest percentage of a given theatre audience is present to be amused and entertained; yet it is interesting to note the various individual reasons for attending a play. Many a business man attends because he wants a change, because he wants to get away from the cares, struggles, and *ennui* of routine in strenuous business activities. He wants something refreshing and entertaining. Another goes, because he wants a good laugh; he is eager for the optimism of life. Other folk, especially the younger ones, want to see a moving story of romantic life, of youth, of love and sentiment, with all its



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warmth and spontaneity; they want to see a struggle of youth, one in which some worthy young man overcomes great odds and wins the buxom and vivacious lassie. They desire to have their emotions appealed to, just as the more sentimental woman likes to go to see a play so that thereafter she may have a good cry,—as in the case of a woman who deliberately attended “The Bird of Paradise” and for a week thereafter, upon her own testimony, every day, at one o’clock, had a good cry about it. On the other hand, some attend the theatre to see the star—Maude Adams in “’Op-o’-Me-Thumb,” John Drew in “The Will,” Nazimova in “War Brides,” Ethel Barrymore in “The Twelve-Pound Look,” Mrs. Fiske in “The Green Cockatoo,” Sarah Padden in “The Clod”—sometimes because they really appreciate good acting or because certain actors are their personal favorites, and sometimes because they wish to be able to tell their friends that they have seen such and such a player in such and such a rôle.

Investigation has revealed that other reasons for attendance at plays, many of them seemingly less significant, are given by various men and women. One woman is reported to have attended plays because she could see stylish gowns and that she had preferred “The Thief” to “A Doll’s House,” because in the former the

leading lady appeared in three different beautiful gowns, whereas, in the latter play, the leading character appeared throughout in the same every-day dress. Some men attend because their wives wish escorts—and they have to go along; or perhaps they may be chivalrous as was Pepys, a devotee of the theatre, who, in his *Diary*, records that he had to take his wife to the play,—“She, poor fool, having nothing better to do.” Certain social sets attend because it is the mode; and, in one extreme case, a woman asserted, “We have to keep up appearances.” One young man, when asked why he went to the theatre, casually replied, “Why, I must have some place to go, and why not go there?” Whether the playwright would have it thus or no, these are some of the motives which prompt individuals to attend the theatre and if he wishes to appeal to this group he will have to take these reasons into account when he writes his play.

Whatever else may be said about these types of theatre-goers, it is important to note that most of them are not predisposed to be insistent as to what they are going to do or how they are going to feel when they get into the playhouse. Practically each one is in a wholly receptive mood, is ready to see and to hear, and is eager to be interested and entertained by anything that will appeal. “The normal audi-

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ence," says Hartley Davis, "enters the theatre in a receptive mood. It is prepared, without an individual consciousness of the fact, to have its emotions stirred by intelligent exaggeration."

In none of the books and magazine articles containing material on the psychology of the theatre audience has this initial receptivity of the assembled group been sufficiently emphasized. The spectators in the playhouse, before the play begins, are a heterogeneous group of persons practically unconscious of themselves and almost wholly in a neutral state of mental and emotional functioning. They do not recognize a common interest, and are not aware of any particular unifying motive. They are in a condition of more or less unstimulated receptivity; but the moment the play begins there is a community of interest which unites this heterogeneous group into a more or less well defined homogeneous unit motivated largely by the one stimulus—the play upon the stage. The audience, unconsciously of course, gives itself over almost wholly to the bidding of the dramatist: here is his opportunity, if he is a skilled workman who knows the motive forces of life, to seize upon the emotions of the assembled group and to sway them as he will, to make them think, feel and want to do and be.

### EMOTIONAL CHARACTERISTICS OF AN AUDIENCE

The practical playwright, as he studies his audience, discovers that it has mental and emotional traits characteristic of assembled groups of whatsoever kind, political, religious, sport, or what you will. One of the most interesting of theatre phenomena is the sudden change, the moment the play begins, of the assembled group from an unmotivated, ununified, heterogeneous group to an assemblage that is motivated by a more or less common impulse, unified, and homogeneous. Immediately, if the play be at all of moment and significance, the audience assumes a personality of its own—a personality which is the average of the mental and emotional qualities of the assembled persons. So long as the stimulus is strong enough and sufficiently interesting, the group may be led as a host is led by a single leader. It may be led to laugh or to cry; to shout its approval or to utter its condemnation; it may be led into the depths of despair or it may be exalted into an appreciation of things universal. The assembly of spectators has something of a soul of its own, which is a composite average<sup>1</sup> of all the individual

<sup>1</sup> Le Bon, in his "Psychology of the Crowd," takes a somewhat different point of view. Le Bon's point of view is ardently shared by Clayton Hamilton in "The Theory of the Theatre," Chapter ii, *The Psychology of Theatre Audiences*.

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minds assembled; and, having a soul of its own, acts and responds largely as a unit, as if it were one individual.

Again, the practical dramatist learns that however intellectual a man may be outside the theatre, he by no means continues to the full this highly intellectual functioning after he becomes a part of the assembled group and responds to the play on the stage. In becoming a part of the theatre audience he very largely merges his being into the personality of the multitude. He no longer acts as a highly intellectual individual, but as a more or less sympathetic participant in the larger and more significant emotional functionings of the audience of which he is an organic part. His moods, his ideas, his feelings are determined very largely by those of the audience rather than by his own initial volition. If the stimulus of the play provokes the laughter of the assembled group, he laughs with it; if it leads the multitude to tears, he weeps too. Whatever be the mental or emotional values provoked in the audience, he functions in pretty much the same way.

The theatre audience is largely emotional rather than highly intellectual. Much of the culture and polish of education and of social activity are, for the time being, somewhat less prominent; the restraint of the conventions of life is removed, and the individual falls back

upon the broad motives and tendencies characteristic of human life in its essence. From the point of view of intellectual standards of education, he has descended several rungs in the ladder of purely mental values. The appeal is no longer to be made primarily to his highly developed logical sense; the appeal must be made, in large measure, to his fundamental emotions which are, of course, in these modern days, somewhat tempered and refined by the training of previous generations.

The practical dramatist, then, who desires to become a popular playwright, in the proper acceptation of the term, must appeal to the fundamental emotions of the group; that is, to the basic and vital emotions of the human race. Love, devotion, sacrifice, fidelity to a trust, patriotism, duty, anger, jealousy, revenge, love of home, love of family, love of woman, maternity and motherhood,—these are some of the motives which impel men and women to struggle and to attain. These are the material of drama. However much the accidents of life and the conventions of the day may appear in a play, they are merely externals: the thing that makes the play worth while is the vital emotional value in human character. The externals in Middleton's "Criminals" are of little consequence; but the idea that the happiness of a girl's married life may be placed in jeopardy because she

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is innocent and ignorant, until her wedding day, of the physical facts of life—because her fond parents have not told her what she should have known,—is of vital significance. The details and setting of “War Brides” are rather ephemeral; but the precept that motherhood and marriage are sacred and that children should be begotten in love and devotion rather than be born into the world because of brutal military expediency, is, again, as significant and vital as life itself.

Although the dramatist cannot select his audience, he must not think that he is obliged to appeal to the emotional natures of a group of heartless wretches of the street who revel in blood and intrigue or of the commonplace of every-day life who respond only to melodramatic spectacle. A theatre audience is not the residue or dregs of society; nor is it the élite, the cultivated, the wealthy, or the chosen few. An audience in the playhouse is composed of the large general average of all classes of society with a sprinkling here and there of the vagabond on the one hand and the few élite on the other. The theatre group must not be confused with the crowd or with the mob; it is representative of neither the upper nor the lower strata of society, but is an average of the community. It is not a characteristically intel-

lectual group; on the contrary, it is emotional and richly human.

### THE INTERESTS OF AN AUDIENCE

The highly mental activities of the theatre group are comparatively few. The dramatist must realize that he is not writing to provoke mental functioning but to stimulate emotional response. He must keep in mind that an audience is fundamentally and richly human. It is, on one occasion, enthusiastic in approbation, and, on another, vehement in disapproval; and both manifestations often occur without any particular reason. On the whole, it is neither reasonable nor judicious; seldom does it analyze or deduce a logical conclusion. Usually it merely feels strongly one way or another. It is generously primitive and thoroughly human; it often loves and hates as unreasonably and as uncompromisingly as a child. If the dramatist wishes his audience to feel strongly one way or another about a given theme, he must take the initiative in the construction of his play and deftly lead them to think and feel as he would have them. This is the dramatist's problem; and, likewise, this is his opportunity to teach the race.

Not only is an audience often unreasonable in its passions and wanting in a tendency to



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judge logically, it is also generally childlike in its credulity. It is usually carelessly unthinking and accepts without demur or question almost anything that the dramatist offers. It will believe nearly all it hears and everything it sees. The more the playwright can tell his story in objective and concrete physical action and pantomime the more likely he is to succeed. What the audience hears told, it must take for granted; but what it sees actually takes place, and there can be no question about it. The human eye is unerring; and an impression once recorded by it is conclusive, and is indelibly fixed in the dramatic sequence of events. While it is obviously better dramaturgy to reveal the story through concrete pictures, the audience does not hesitate to accept any plausible thing that the dramatist may tell it. This is particularly applicable to the premises or conditions antecedent to the opening of the play.

In 1893, Brunetière<sup>1</sup> came forth with his well-known theory that the basis of all drama is a struggle, a conflict, and that without this struggle there can be no play. Brander Matthews<sup>2</sup> has been an able champion of this thesis, whereas William Archer<sup>3</sup> has sought to show

<sup>1</sup> English translation, with Introduction by Henry Arthur Jones, is published by the Dramatic Museum of Columbia University.

<sup>2</sup> "The Development of the Drama," Chapter i.

<sup>3</sup> "Play-Making," Chapter iii.

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that this law is by no means universal in drama. In fact he would have us believe that in some plays there is but little struggle between contending forces, or sometimes none at all. Whatever be the merits of the two points of view, an assemblage of any kind is never more interested in anything than it is in a struggle or conflict of one sort or another. A sense of struggle is a fundamental biological principle of human life: struggle and contention against obstacles is the very stuff of existence. So far as human experience goes, it begins at birth and ends at death; it obtained at the beginning of the race and has continued until the present moment. Moreover, it is one of the most vital things the future has to offer; the struggle of to-morrow is a matter of thought for to-day. The function of a dramatist is to appeal to his public in terms of their own experience; for this reason, there is nothing that is so interesting to an assembled group as the presentation of forces and characters coming to the grapple for superiority,—action, situation, climax, victory!

Moreover, since human beings inherently are interested in struggle and conflict and since they are, in the light of their experiences, in a position to understand values in contending forces, an audience is usually more or less partisan. In no sense is it a disinterested on-looker; it in-

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instinctively wants its favored motives and characters to win. Certain principles and sentiments in life are to it wholly right; others are wholly wrong, and the audience is not inclined to compromise. When forces and characters come to the grapple, the attitude of the spectators is always true to their inherited experiences. Whenever the dramatist, because of intent or because of ignorance, goes contrary-wise to this instinct and experience, he is at once branded as being untrue to life. Experience has also taught the race that one force or another always wins out. As a result, the spectators want their ideals and motives triumphant, and are not satisfied unless they do win out. There is good psychology for the proverbial "happy ending," and, while it may not always be true to every-day life, it is true to the total human experience of the race.

From the point of view of externals, probably nothing is so much to the likes of an audience as spectacle; color, display, pomp, parade—things that are perceived by the eye. Pageantry, dress, properties, regalia, color schemes, and lighting effects, always appeal. The modern settings of Bakst, Appia, Fuchs, and a dozen others, are interesting for their color and play of light, if for no other reason. Livingston Platt's setting for the Marion Morgan dancers is quite as interesting as the dances themselves.

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At Cornell University, "A Game of Chess" was staged in blacks and whites with unusual artistic and dramatic effects. The dress suits and evening gowns of Alfred Sutro's "The Bracelet" and "The Correct Thing" not only give a certain fineness of tone to the play but also are attractive because of the decorum.

One other interesting aspect of the emotional and psychological nature of an assembled group is its susceptibility to emotional contagion. There is scarcely a playgoer who has not had the experience of being provoked to laughter because some one near him burst forth into spontaneous expressions of pleasure; and every theatre-goer knows how difficult it is to keep down the lump in the throat when a neighbor in the theatre is sobbing during a pathetic scene. Oftentimes the response of an entire audience is determined by the action of a single person. The strong emotional functioning of one individual often precipitates the latent susceptibility of the entire assembly; there have been numerous instances in which the persistent applauding of one man has induced an entire audience into doing the same thing, even though at the outset it was not particularly inclined to do so. Almost anything that will precipitate the easily susceptible emotions of an audience into a more or less definite channel will capture the house for the moment and will often deter-

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mine the attitude of the spectators during the entire play. A good dramatist is keen to take advantage of this fact. If he can once get the proper response from his public, by his having deftly laid the means in his play whereby to do so, he has gone a long way to win his case.

### CHARACTERISTICS OF A PRESENT-DAY THEATRE AUDIENCE

While any theatre audience has all the characteristics of an assemblage of whatever kind, it has also certain other elements that differentiate it from any other assembled group. Members of a political convention, of a social order, or of a religious gathering, usually are unified by a common interest, even before the meeting is convened; a theatre audience, however, is quite heterogeneous. In the former cases, generally the individuals come from more or less well defined strata of society; in the case of the theatre group, all classes and conditions of people are represented. What would interest the political, the social, or the religious group, in all probability, would not interest the theatre group. The theatre audience is more cosmopolitan, more representative, more heterogeneous; accordingly, the dramatist must appeal to the large fundamental human emotions rather than to the more specialized interests of the

other type of audience. He must write for the general group and not for the coterie.

Other gatherings—religious, political, social—are frequently more serious and sober; the theatre audience, however, is in a receptive mood for pleasure and entertainment. The motive is always recreation; a theatre audience has not assembled to be edified or to be educated; it has no particular desire to be taught. What it desires—though it is not always really conscious of it—is to have its emotions played upon. It seeks amusement and entertainment in the widest sense of the term—through laughter, tears, sympathy, terror, anger, jealousy, ambition. On the whole it is not interested in philosophical theses or in propaganda of any kind; it does not wish to be preached to—individuals attend religious services for that sort of stimulus—and is not inclined to brook anything that does not stimulate it into emotional functioning of one sort or another.

Another characteristic of a present-day theatre audience—especially in matinées—is the preponderance<sup>1</sup> of women and children over men. Victor Hugo, a playwright who thoroughly knew his audience, in his preface to “*Ruy Blas*,” asserted that there are three kinds of playgoers: thinkers, who demand charac-

<sup>1</sup> A survey conducted by the Frohman office showed this to be seventy per cent.

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terization; women, who demand passion; and the mob, who demand action. That women and children are more emotional than men, is, nowadays, an accepted commonplace in psychology. Sentiment,—not necessarily sentimentality—romance, emotion, passion, are elemental in woman's nature; a play of action with deep passion for the motive is sure to hold her attention and provoke her emotional response. The social problem of woman, the problem of the eternal human triangle, the duel of sex and of love, are ever near to a woman's heart; and it is noticeable that this material is again and again the theme of both three-act and One-act contemporary plays. Probably no writer of One-act plays has handled various significant aspects of the life of woman more effectively than has George Middleton in such plays as "Criminals," "Madonna," "The Cheat of Pity," and "Mothers." Moreover, the theme of "War Brides" by Marion Craig Wentworth, "Modesty" by Paul Hervieu, "The Correct Thing" by Alfred Sutro, "Happiness" by J. Hartley Manners, "Countess Julie," "Facing Death," "The Stronger" by August Strindberg, "Overtones" by Alice Gerstenberg, and "Suppressed Desires" by George Cram Cook and Susan Glasspell have to do with material largely of interest to womankind.

Just as men are interested in things of their

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own experience and preference, so women are attentive to those matters most pertinent to the lives of their sex. Motherhood, children, devotion to and sacrifice for the family, fidelity to the marriage vow, love, revenge, hatred, jealousy, ambition, are of unusual concern. She has hopes for her children when they shall have grown up; she is solicitous for their immediate welfare. She has aspirations and dreams of idealized home life, of wealth, and of social position. She is concerned about the decorum of growing daughters, and about the prospects of the young son. She is the private counsellor and spiritual advisor of every member of the household; far more so than the husband whose interests are in business and material activities of life. For herself, she is often concerned about the attitude of the husband toward her, about his consideration and treatment of her. She is curiously conscious of the inheritance of the ages as regards the position of woman so far as married and social relations are taken into account. Accordingly, she is spontaneous in her applause of any sententious statement on the stage as to how woman should be regarded and treated by society in general and by husbands in particular. She has her own problems, her own likes and dislikes, all of which are her inherited concern. She is ever between the natural functionings of her own passions and



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emotions and the danger of heartless judgment and condemnation of modern social conventions. Any One-act play presenting woman in one of these themes will have in it a large element of appeal.

Psychological tests of considerable variety, covering a goodly period of time, in University laboratories, have revealed the fact that in any given mental activity the minds of women, during the first part of some special period of time, are as keen and dependable as those of men; but that after a certain point the woman's mind, instead of continuing constant and steady in further activity, as does the man's, grows more and more inconstant and unsteady until there is little certainty as to what course it may take. In a word, after a certain period of attention, women become more or less inattentive. This is likewise true of the minds of children. This psychological phenomenon has a very material bearing on the technique of the modern play.

Since women are somewhat inattentive and are also somewhat inclined to comment to their companions on aspects of the play as it is presented before them, often they get but little of the dialogue which emphasizes points of progress in the plot or which presents significant expository material of the play. As a result, the dramatist is obliged to reveal his story largely by physical, objective action, by concrete pic-

tures that can readily be seen. Action and stage-business are essential assets in constructing a modern play. Instead of dialogue, striking incidents and situations must be resorted to to tell the story on the stage. Important facts, ideas, sentiments, must be repeated again and again in order to get them across the foot-lights and to impress them upon the minds of the audience. Eugene Scribe learned from very practical experience that every important matter had to be re-stated at least three times in order to make it clear to the public. Brander Matthews reports that an English stage-manager, after years of personal observation, said that if you wish your audience to get a thing, you have to tell them that you are going to do it, and while it is being done you must tell them that you are doing it, and after it is done you must tell that it is done, and then they won't understand it. Nor is this report to be taken lightly: a careful analysis of significant plays actually reveals that such a technical method has been resorted to again and again. A rich story of life, with deep passion and emotion as the motive, told in objective, concrete action is the type of play that appeals to a present-day audience; and this is an observation that the dramatist, amateur or professional, must take to heart.

It has been held that in the matter of the in-

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herited fondness of the race for color, display, and striking effects, the tendencies of women are usually more manifest than those of men. Elaborate and becoming gowns on the stage, the effective coloring of scenery, the appropriateness of color schemes and properties, and the display of lighting, always provoke interest and attention. Dancing, parade, promenade, and delicate formalities, woman observes with eagerness. The dramatist who takes into account these externals of a play, will go a long way in the direction of having an added element of appeal. Obviously a thorough knowledge of both fundamentals and accidentals of human life is a necessary and valuable asset to the person who hopes to become the acceptable playwright of his day.

### CHARACTERISTICS OF THE AMERICAN PUBLIC

It is an accepted precept, nowadays, that drama depends upon social support; it is directly related to the communal aspect of life. Moreover, it has to deal with life in terms of life, and it has to appeal to life in matters with which life is concerned. "Even before nationality in drama added characteristics which distinguish the British from the French or German, and differentiated the American as separate, even though a part of the English,

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the drama echoed the fundamental principles of life, and dealt specifically with the vital energy which swayed man's blood." "Either a dramatist has, or has not written a play with some telling substance in it. That is the primary test of the theatre—the test that knows no nationality." Yet there is no dramatist so far known, whose work is accessible for study and analysis, who has written wholly from the point of view of the universal; his social environment and national characteristics have ever been attendant circumstances to influence his product. To the dramatist who may write for an American public a note or two of analysis and comment thereon will not be amiss.

Fundamentally the American public has the common interests of humanity at large. It is richly human; vigorous and zealous; and it feels strongly if it feels at all. Its interests often appear in aspects said to be distinctively American in contrast to their manifestations in the nations of Europe with whom there is nearest kin. America has the spirit of mature youth; full of vigor and ever in a struggle for mastery of one kind or another. An American audience, with all its virility and strength, likes a struggle above all things else; psychological and static drama is not to its tastes. It is noticeable, however, that it witnesses a struggle with a strong sense of the "square deal." Fairness

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in the contest, unbiased struggle in the game of life, no unfair advantage,—these are aspects of its largeness of heart. An American is eager that his favored characters and forces shall win out, but he is equally desirous that the victory be won fairly. He is quick to see an issue, quick to take the initiative, quick to follow an advantage, but seldom, indeed, does he resort to actual deceit and trickery.

In the next place, the American public has a wholesome sense of the democratic; it has no castes, no prohibitive social distinctions. The average American is generous in his feeling that the whole world is kin, and that no man is any better than another except in so far as he makes himself better. The American has no false ideas of democracy; he believes that there *are* some men better and more worthy than others. Democracy to him means that every human being has it as his inalienable right to raise himself as far above his environment as lies within his power. Accordingly, it is observed that some men have lifted themselves above the common herd and are, therefore, more desirable and more efficient members of society than their brothers; but this superiority is in no wise to be attributed to birth or to inherited right,—it is due to the individual initiative and worth. A play, then, that presents a picture of human life under the rules of

"democracy" and the "square deal" is pretty certain to find a responsive chord in an American audience. This is why Richard Harding Davis's "Blackmail," in which a blackmailer meets death at the hands of a mining engineer, appeals quite as much as does Marion Craig Wentworth's "War Brides," whose theme arouses the sense of morality and justice so keenly alive in every American heart.

In his demeanor, the American is direct and clear-cut, even to bluntness. His heart is large rather than subtle; he is characterized by direct deed rather than by evasive thought. His answer is terse rather than veiled and uncertain in meaning. On his part, at least, there must be no misunderstanding. He does not choose to quibble over terms, he wishes to be clearly understood. Even in his love affairs, there is often a directness and a business-like bluntness that seems to be far removed from the romantic. Says *Curtis Jadwin* in Channing Pollock's dramatization of Frank Norris's vivid novel, "The Pit," when he proposes to the charming *Miss Dearborn*, "I'm a business man, *Miss Dearborn*. It doesn't take me long to discover what I want, and, when I find that thing, I generally get it. I want you to marry me." However unconventional and unromantic this may seem to be, it is thoroughly honest,—and it rings true!

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There is no note of despair or of gloom in American life; the American is optimistic to a fault. His is a life of hope, of ambition, of exaltation. In failure or defeat he does not hold fate or providence responsible, but in the very moment of defeat he has already resolved to try again. He is boyishly heroic even to recklessness. There is no task too large, no undertaking too offset with obstacles; he has large faith in his powers and is confident of success. His buoyant sense of power and of confidence are his greatest of heritages, and an American public applauds it whether it appears in the struggle for the hand of an American girl or in a business undertaking involving the risk of millions of capital.

Again, the American is genuinely wholesome and sympathetic. To him home and loved ones mean a great deal; he is generous to the last farthing. Social institutions receive his contributions, and no one, however humble in life, shall go hungry or unclothed. He has a high sense of conduct, though he is seldom conventional. It is for this reason that in Alfred Sutro's "The Correct Thing" the sympathy of the American is wholly with *Kitty Bellamy*, who in her whole-hearted love was guilty of indiscretion, rather than with *D'Arcy Galbraith*, who was quite willing to provide her with a comfortable maintenance, but who, because it would

jeopardize his political ambitions, was unwilling to marry the very woman who had been his wife in every way but that of legality. Because he is wholesome and sympathetic, he is usually companionable and has a faculty for adaptability. He makes the most of a situation because he can see a point of view other than his own. His sympathies are real; he therefore feels keenly about those things which are vital in his life.

Because the American is optimistic, wholesome; and sympathetic, he has a good fund of humor, a few opinions to the contrary notwithstanding. He laughs heartily, and he plays as hard as he works. He is ever ready for fun and amusement, and is the greatest theatre-goer in the world. Moreover his humor is not forced, but spontaneous and genuine, sometimes even to rustic hilarity. Paul Armstrong's "Woman Proposes," a vaudeville playlet of considerable merit, is as laughable to him as Tchekoff's "A Marriage Proposal" and "The Boor," or Alice Gerstenberg's "Overtones" and George Cram Cook and Susan Glaspell's "Suppressed Desires." In his laughter, as in all things else in which he engages, he gives himself up wholly to the matter in hand. The American dramatist has the rarest opportunity, so far as a humorous public is concerned, to write the greatest of modern comedies.



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Probably the most noticeable and most commendable characteristic of the American is his capacity for action. He is a tireless worker, and has scarcely finished one task before he takes up the next. He has foresight and constructive ability; this is manifested again and again in his material developments and inventions. The material resources of the land, though there is accompanying waste, have been developed effectively and on a largeness of scale never before dreamed of. He is ever seeking new and larger opportunity. He is aggressive and competent; he is persevering, and intelligent; and he is destined to become one of the greatest forces in the development of a greater and more stable world democracy. His activities often savor a bit of the spectacular and the melodramatic, but his purpose rings true and his heart is in his work because he feels the impelling force of his own native possibilities.

Large opportunity is open to the playwright who writes for the American public! A public richly human in all its phases! With a sense of democracy that makes the whole world kin, with a highly developed sense of fair play in the game of life, and with a directness that is unmistakably clear and effective, the American audience is fine material for the dramatist who can strike aright the responsive chords. The wholesome sympathy and whole-hearted opti-

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mism of the American people furnish the spontaneity so essential to dramatic achievement; their will to achieve and their unlimited capacity for action furnish the motive forces for the greatest drama of modern times. And their generous sense of humor will prevent the development of the drama into anything other than that which is ennobling and exalting. Latent in American life are all the larger elements of significant dramatic products. To the dramatist who thoroughly knows that life—and to him only—is any large measure of success possible.

## CHAPTER III

### THE DRAMATIST AND HIS TECHNIQUE

#### THE QUALITIES OF THE DRAMATIST

ONE is not going very far astray if one assert that the first essential quality of a good playwright is honesty and sincerity. He is thoroughly honest both with himself and with his art, and is openly frank in dealing with the public for whose entertainment and uplift he writes. He is not a trickster, nor a jealous charlatan. His chief concern is not that he shall surpass some rival dramatist, but that he shall develop what is latent within him and leave the matter of superiority take care of itself. His prime intent is that, out of his richness of experience and of insight, he shall so construct his play that the essential values may be got to the audience in an effective and moving way. He is eager to interest others because he himself is interested; he wishes others to respond emotionally because he himself feels deeply about vital things. Never does he write just because he is dissatisfied with life. He knows full well that the fault may lie largely with

himself. He knows that his dis-ease, ferment, turbulence, dislike, and ill-nature, are not the stuff out of which an art product is usually made. He knows that anything so abnormal is always overcolored to the degree of the ultra-theatrical. Never does he make the mistake of thinking that just because there is an irritating pebble in his shoe, he is, therefore, qualified to write a play dealing with certain fundamentals of life.

Because he is honest and sincere with himself and with his work, he is keenly alert and progressive. He knows that he must not treat his art lightly, nor trust it to the uncertainty of chance. Like a really intelligent person, he always profits by experience: a mistake once made and recognized, he never repeats it; and a dramatic effect once secured, he immediately sets himself to the task of improving and perfecting the method by which the effect is obtained. He detects unerringly how others get results, and immediately profits by his observation. He soon learns whether his own forte is in plotting, in characterization, in dialogue, or in securing strong emotional effects; and he is equally quick to detect by what methods he can work to best advantage. Now and then he may grow fantastic and get his head into the clouds, but, if he does, he is fully aware of it and always keeps his feet firm on solid

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ground. He has a keen and observing eye, an open mind, and a generously responsive heart. Nothing escapes him. He is ever growing in depth of insight and in wisdom, for it is out of his knowledge of life that the dramatic values of his plays must come.

A second characteristic of a good playwright is that he has a keen dramatic sense. Everything that he sees, everything that he experiences, has value and significance to him. Life in all its aspects is interesting, and he sees manifestations of it always in terms of character and of vital human forces. Whether the centre of attention be incident or be character, he is sympathetic with all human activities. He feels deeply the vital forces operative in both men and the events of life; he detects unerringly the significance of dramatic personalities and of dramatic situation. He responds to the impelling force of motive. He is moved to action and expression because he feels keenly and deeply.

Because he has so deep a sense of values in human character and is inherently sympathetic with its various manifestations he has the power of projecting himself, to an unusual degree, into the personalities of the characters of his play. He has the faculty of putting himself into another person's place. He detects and feels the impelling force of human motive and

can have his characters act accordingly; he feels the response to varying stimuli with which his characters may come into contact and is able, therefore, to have them demean themselves along lines of vital conduct. Being as generously sympathetic with life as he is, the playwright lives in the very emotions and personalities of his characters. He can feel, to a large degree, the torture of fear, the pangs of remorse, the rancor of jealousy, the fervor of love and affection, the zeal of enthusiasm, the bitterness of sorrow. He can be as vain as the egotist, as pompous as the shallow-minded, as demure and modest as the shy maiden, as quarrelsome as a selfish youngster who insists upon playing the game of life unfairly. As a sound genetic psychologist, he understands human motives and can make his characters act in semblance of genuinely human beings.

Furthermore, being keen to detect and appreciate underlying motive forces which, in the natural course of events, give rise to dramatic movement, the playwright has a nice sense of situation and crisis. He is a born plot-maker. Character and incident are to him dramatic motive factors. He has the ability to recognize the possible outcome of latent elements and circumstantial incident. He sees clearly that if certain characters of given personalities are brought together under certain definite condi-

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tions there will result inter-action of forces which will give rise to plot-development. Once the dramatic movement is started, he sees there must be a final outcome. He is a logical thinker, and he has the power of creative imagination. Plot, to him, is but a natural and logical sequence of situations and crises leading to a crucial moment. He sees nothing, he hears nothing, that does not immediately take on, for him, dramatic and structural aspect. He has the constructive power of telling a moving story directly to a given end.

The real dramatist has a keen eye for dramatic effect. He never loses sight of his audience while he is building and writing his play. His chief interest and his prime intent are to provoke the assembled group to emotional functioning of one kind or another. The born playwright is not satisfied until he has seen his work on the stage before an audience, where his characters are made flesh and blood before his own eyes, and where he himself can feel the thrill of the assembled group as they respond to the stimuli he has placed before them. The practical dramatist is obliged so to appeal to his spectators that they will, in large measure, lose their consciousness of self in the consciousness of the emotional values of the play. His great task is to sway the hearts of the assembled group, to make them think and feel as he would

have them. The dramatist who is sincere, whose heart is in his work, always aims to appeal to his audience. Whatever else he may do, he never forgets the spectator.

## THE EQUIPMENT OF THE DRAMATIST

Any author who hopes to be successful in the practical aspect of playwriting should be thoroughly equipped for his work. It must not be denied that genius and talent for dramatic writing go a long way; but sincerity and willingness to work are almost as valuable assets. The practice of dramaturgy is not a thing to be undertaken by the one inclined to laziness. Limitation of natural endowment is sometimes no greater handicap to successful work than a wealth of power. As a matter of course, more effort will have to be made in the former case, but there often results more skill and sureness; in the latter case, mere wealth of powers, especially when not under definite control because of lack of training, may fail ignobly to meet the issue when the real test comes. No ambitious dramatist can be content with mediocre and half-hearted effort; it is the specific and the intensive work that counts. No author is equipped with the right motive for dramatic activity, unless he is sincerely eager to set himself to the task of laboring long and arduously.



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In the second place, the ambitious playwright is eagerly desirous of learning the precepts and the motive forces of human nature, which active life alone can teach him. He cultivates the joy of living, the optimism of hard endeavor. He is not a cynic. The sincere dramatist is content to find out what life has to teach him and what it has to offer him as his lot. He does not insist that life shall give him what he thinks is his due; nor is he peevish and caustic if things are not altogether to his liking. His mind and heart are ever open and receptive; only by a willingness to accept gladly what life has to give him can he hope to receive any aid from his observation of life round about him. Life he must know intimately and sympathetically, else he cannot reveal it to the public for which he writes. If he is never carried away by his own emotions of either laughter or tears, he cannot hope to be very successful in swaying his audience. He must study, he must observe, he must learn, and he must really live, if he would equip himself adequately for the high calling of the dramatist.

In the third place, the serious playwright acquaints himself with the best that has been thought, said, and done in the field of dramatic activity. He reads and studies drama widely in order to find out the varying conditions under which plays have been written, to learn what

technical methods have been employed in each case, and to discover why some plays have succeeded and why others have failed. He seeks to profit by the successful experiences of others; he purposes to avoid their mistakes. He studies and observes how emotional response is most effectively and most economically secured. He sets himself to the task of learning the various methods of workmanship, he acquaints himself with the details of dramatic technique. Moreover, he does not limit his study to the plays of his own country and of his own day; plays of all nations and of all times are his companions. He knows ancient classical drama as well as modern and contemporary; he knows Molière and Hervieu, Seneca and D'Annunzio, Goethe and Sudermann, Shakespeare and G. Bernard Shaw, Ibsen and August Strindberg. Above all, as a writer of One-act plays, he is thoroughly acquainted with the several hundred of the shorter dramatic forms that have appeared during the last few years. He knows drama first, last, and always, because it is the art product which he himself purposes to bring forth.

Again the enthusiastic dramatist familiarizes himself with dramatic theory and dramatic criticism from Aristotle to Clayton Hamilton. "The drama, like all other arts or crafts," says Charlton Andrews, "has its body of doc-

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trine gained from experimentation. One must know as many facts about ways and means before broaching the construction of a play, at least as one must know, for instance, before beginning to build a house." To know the best that has been thought and said on these matters is a valuable asset to any playwright. To that end he spends many hours poring over Aristotle, Hegel, Brunetière, Sarcey, Lessing, *Dumas fils*, Victor Hugo, William Archer, Clayton Hamilton, and a score of other critical writers on the drama. Unless he is an author whose chief pleasure is derived from stout denial of all established principles of art, he will have frequent need to profit by the observations of the world's greatest dramatic critics and dramatic theorists who have more than once caught sight of and laid down some of the fundamentals of dramaturgy. Moreover, the only way by which he may hope not to copy anybody, if he is bent on originality, is to study and to know everybody.

Furthermore, the serious playwright profits by his every attendance at a play because he has the right attitude toward the art of the theatre. He does not cavil, as does the hypercritical egotist, at a play, whether amateur or professional, because it has defects in it. He has too much knowledge of dramatic art to demand perfection; nor does he insist that a

play shall be written absolutely in accordance with his preconceived ideas of what a play must be. He knows that there are many ways of writing a drama, and that almost any way is a good one that succeeds in carrying emotional values to the minds and hearts of the assembled group. Moreover, he does not judge any play until all the evidence is in, until he has thoroughly mastered its every detail and has fully conceived the author's idea and purpose. To him, it is not a question whether he, himself, would have handled the thesis in the same way in which the author did, but he detects whether the *author in his own way* made clear just what was intended by way of dramatic effect. He realizes that the *author* has conceived a dramatic problem in *his own mind* and has set it forth in *his own way*. The question is does the author make *his problem* and *his method* clear and effective. This is the test that the real playwright applies. He does not insist that every play shall be written according to the canons of his own making.

And lastly, the serious playwright is solicitous of worth-while criticism. He is not afraid of the competent critic, and is an adept in detecting the shallow one. A sincere dramatist has no false notions concerning his powers; he lays aside his vanity and welcomes true counsel. He is suspicious of false praise and subtle

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flattery; he knows too well that the sycophant admires everything and has no sense of relative values. He seeks the opinion of a severe but competent critic primarily to determine whether he has succeeded in making himself clear and effective. Moreover, he knows that often a really good thing in a play is severely condemned, and that frequently, also, a bad thing is given high praise. In the last analysis, he himself is so familiar with the plays of the masters, so aware of the precepts of worthy observers, and so cognizant of the nature of his own powers, that he is his own best critic.

### THE NATURE AND VALUE OF TECHNIQUE

The One-act play is a type of prose fiction; that is, it is a form of story-telling. To tell a dramatic story through the medium of the three hundred printed pages of a book which is to be read, and to present a dramatic story through the medium of characters, dialogue and stage business, on a stage before an audience, are two fundamentally different processes. The materials and methods used in the one case are in little wise similar to those used in the other. It is the technical processes that very largely differentiate the arts. Although the One-act play is a type of prose fiction, it, nevertheless,

has a method and a technique distinctively its own.

The basis of good workmanship in any art is a thorough understanding of its principles. An inefficient workman neither understands these principles nor does he know how to use his tools. Genuine craftsmanship means mastery of both tools and method of technique. It is a poor musician who would have to admit that he does not know intimately the technique of his subject. In the practice of dramaturgy, even decided originality must be supplanted by technique. "Craftsmanship can, within limits, be acquired," says William Archer, "genius cannot; and it is craftsmanship that pilots us through the perils of the first performance, genius that carries us on to the apotheosis of the thousandth." The skilled dramatist not only knows just what effect he wishes to get but also knows just by what means he is to secure it. Whatever else the playwright may be, he must never be ignorant of the very thing that he aims to put to practical use. The ambitious playwright, in these days, must be nothing short of a past master in dramatic method.

To the beginner, in particular, a knowledge of some sort of dramatic method is not only an element of efficiency but also an element of economy. It is not to be denied that experience and practice are the best teachers; but while

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the playwright is serving his apprenticeship, it is well to have something of a definite method to adhere to, even though it be a dogmatic one. A knowledge of dramatic theory and precept is a good guide to prevent the student from becoming confused and muddled with alternatives before he has fully grasped any one precept. The playwright will progress much more rapidly if he has in mind one good method, even though he makes some mistakes, rather than flounder about because of uncertainty of what way to proceed. If he thoroughly understands some definite method, he is very sure to avoid inexcusable blunders and he is not likely to meander or to go astray. Dramatic precept, even though a bit dogmatic, is a good guide for the one who, for the first time, essays writing a play.

On the other hand, dramatic rules and laws, in the proper acceptance of the terms, are not dogmatic theories of pedants and of scholiasts, but are the precepts deduced from practical experience and from sympathetic study of the world's dramatic masterpieces. They have come to be by inductive processes; they are empirical in their origin. In any case, they are intended to be guides rather than hard and fast regulations. ". . . grasp clearly," says Brunetière, "the difference between the idea of Law and of Rule; the Rule being always limited

by its very expression, incapable of exceeding it without destroying itself, always narrow, consequently unbending, rigid, or so to speak, tyrannical; and the Law, on the contrary, inevitable by definition and so fundamentally immutable, but broad, supple, flexible in its application, very simple and very general at the same time, very rich in its application, and, without ceasing to be Law, always ready to be enriched by whatever reflection, experience, or history contribute in confirmations to explain it, or in contradictions to absorb it."

It goes without saying that no playwright will achieve a good play by merely adhering to precepts. On the other hand, it must be recognized that they are valuable aids. Moreover, no sincere dramatist treats fundamental precepts lightly. "Submit yourself," says Bronson Howard, "to the laws of dramatic truth, so far as you can conceive them by honest mental exertion and observation. Do not mistake any mere defiance of these laws for originality. You might as well show your originality by defying the laws of gravitation." The greater dramatists have seldom been inventors; most frequently they are but perfectors of methods long since in vogue. It is the lesser men who invent new tricks and who startle with innovations. Beginners, in particular, should aim at technical perfection; and, to attain this end,



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they must give heed to precept. Masters may take liberties with law; beginners should be slaves to it. Even a master is not a paragon of all things; usually he is able to do but a few things well. Any playwright should try to rid himself of the arbitrary restriction of rule and precept, but not before he knows by practical applications of them what the rules are. Lope de Vega had thoroughly mastered his craft when he wrote, "I banish Terence and Plautus from my study that they may not cry out against me," and "But what can I do if I have written four hundred and eighty-three comedies, along with the one which I have finished this week? For all of these, except six, gravely sin against art." Only after the artist has thoroughly mastered the technique of his craft, should he seek to vary and to adjust his method.

Although it is the better part of wisdom that a beginner in playwriting master some one method, it must not be forgotten that no one method is the best, and that any method is a good one which holds and moves an audience. The really fundamental precepts of dramaturgy merely insist that one must early gain the emotional interest of the audience, hold it and heighten it till the close, and then dismiss it satisfied. One thing should be kept in mind in dramatic art as well as in other human affairs; namely, that perfection, if not unallowable, is

exceedingly rare. Indeed, it is no disparagement to the great dramatists to admit of them that they frequently show rather what to avoid than what to do. It should be recognized that any technical method has its defects and that no scheme of dramaturgy can possibly fit all cases. Each play is a separate dramatic problem requiring individual treatment. It is only after the playwright has become proficient in some one method that he can venture, with any degree of security, into new technical practices.

Moreover, in mastering dramatic structure, as in mastering anything worth while, no substitute has yet been found for patience and hard work. Distinction in any art is not acquired over night. The athlete who displays enviable "form" in running the hundred-yard dash, who runs so gracefully that it is a delight to watch him, has acquired this "form" by long and patient practice under a strict and exacting coach. The playwright must not fail to put forth every effort to learn his craft; and he must not expect to mature during the time of writing but one lone play. The writing of a One-act play is a serious matter; it must not be approached in the spirit of mere boyish glee. Play-making is not child's play. The ambitious dramatist will do well to do apprentice work for three or four years,—in any case he should not expect to write marketable drama be-

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fore he has thoroughly matured in both his mental powers and in his technical method. Very few writers become expert before the age of thirty or thirty-five. The playwright who is serious in his work builds his plays intellectually in cold blood; and then he writes them emotionally and esthetically.

And when the first complete draft of the One-act play is done, then begins the real labor of authorship. Close study and examination of it will reveal that there are crudities of structure, awkwardness and prolixity of dialogue, lack of adequate treatment here and bad emphasis there, and a dozen and one other things, all of which must be remedied before the play can be said to be finished. Boileau in his "Art of Poetry" wrote,—

"A hundred times consider what you've said;  
Polish, repolish, every color lay;  
And sometimes add, but oftener take away."

The author should be in no hurry to finish his product. He should take time to think and ponder. Now is the time when he must not work in haste; he must not value himself for writing fast, for things done in a hurry usually lack judgment and polish. Correction, revision, and polish must, of course, have their limit even though the play is not perfection. On the other

hand, no playwright, who takes his art at all seriously, will ever think of putting his play by as being finished, until he has given his very utmost to the perfecting of every detail.

## CHAPTER IV

### THE THEME OF THE ONE-ACT PLAY

#### THE DRAMATIC VALUE OF A THEME

To reveal human life and to present it in such way that it will provoke attention and emotional response from the observer or reader is the chief purpose of any art form,—and particularly is this true of the drama which is written to be presented on a stage before an assembled group. Not to champion or to defend aspects of life, nor to attack or condemn them is its function; art has for its aim the bodying forth, in concrete terms which can readily be appreciated by the senses, life itself without comment pro or con other than that revealed by the personality and outlook on life of the author. Moreover, unless the art form appeal to the observer or reader in some more or less definite way, it will have failed of its purpose. Drama especially must arouse the powers of attention and provoke mental and emotional response in the minds and hearts of the audience. The playwright who would lead his public to think, to feel, and to want to do or to be, must, at the outset, have definitely in mind just

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what he wants his audience to feel; just what, in his play, he desires them to respond to.

The drama, largely emotional in its values and effects, must as an art product, aim at something of a singleness of impression or unity of effect; the assembled group must be made to feel that they have observed and experienced something more or less definite of the moving forces of life. This effect is what will remain fixed as a leavening influence in the mind long after the essentials of plot, situation, and character, whereby the theme of the play has been made clear, have faded from the memory. What the play was about is often held in mind long after all else is forgotten. Not infrequently, at the close of a play, one is able easily to formulate the impression of what the play dealt with; more often, however, unless one deliberately analyze it, the impression remains unnamed but none the less powerful and moving. These impressions are usually either strong and sympathetic emotional feelings, as in Fenn and Price's "Op-o'-Me-Thumb," or else a consciousness of having newly realized and observed some essential truth of human existence, as in Alice Gerstenberg's "Overtones," Paul Hervieu's "Modesty," and George Cram Cook and Susan Glaspell's "Suppressed Desires." In any case, the practical dramatist, having sought to produce some definite emotional effect in his audi-

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ence, by appealing to and provoking their emotional natures to functioning, pre-determines what that effect shall be and then marshals all his forces—plot, characterization, dialogue, setting,—so as to get that effect dramatically to his public. The initial step on the part of the playwright is to determine what impression he would convey to his audience and what emotional response he would secure.

It is a psychological observation that the human mind is ever reaching out and searching for something tangible, for some definite, concrete thing on which it can lay hold. In expressing its own ideas and feelings—since ideas and feelings cannot, as psychologists hold, be expressed in terms of themselves—it is ever looking for that in life which most adequately represents and expresses those ideas and feelings. An audience, in its very psychological nature, unconsciously demands something definite, tangible and complete; it must have something that it can recognize and appreciate, just as personality is a recognizable element in a human being. No work of art can claim distinction as such, unless it has a significant meaning—not in any didactic sense of course—unless it provoke response and leave an impression of one kind or another. Dumas *filis* said that he always wished to leave with the spectators something to think over. Indeed, since

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the human mind does seek that which is definite and tangible, there is little hope for the One-act play, or for that matter, for any product, if it leaves one with no definite impression at all, or else with several somewhat in conflict and unrelated. Unity of effect is a fundamental law of the One-act play.

The insistence that a One-act play have a theme or an idea is not arbitrary dictum; it is but a concession to the psychological demands of the human mind. "If you inculcate an idea into your play," said Clyde Fitch, "so much the better for your play and for you and for your audience. In fact there is small hope for your play as a play, if you do not have some idea in it, somewhere and somehow, even if it be hidden." All human beings in their inter-reaction in every-day life, receive many and various re-current impressions about this and that which, in time, crystallize into precepts, beliefs, convictions, likes and dislikes, or prejudices if you will. These opinions finally come to stand for what life has taught them or what they think it has taught them. These opinions become vital motive forces. And the play which has for its end and aim the emphasis of one of these larger forces of life has gone a long way to provoke emotional response, because the play is fundamentally about something.

It has been pointed out in the chapter on The



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Dramatist and His Audience, that an assembled group is not particularly inclined to take the initiative in thinking and in feeling; the stimuli for them must come from the play itself, as it appears in concrete form on the stage. Accordingly, the dramatist must do the initial thinking and feeling for them; he must provoke them to responding in the way that he would have them respond. At the outset, he must have a definite effect in mind. It may be that the playwright wishes to emphasize a fact of life, as in George Middleton's "Criminals" and "Mothers"; or it may be that he wishes to reveal a definite personality or character, as in Sir James M. Barrie's "The Twelve-Pound Look" and Lewis Beach's "The Clod"; on the other hand, he may wish to impress his audience with the significance of a given situation or action, as in August Strindberg's "Countess Julie" and "Facing Death"; or, again, he may desire to provoke one's feelings by appealing to one of the fundamental human emotions,—love and affection, hate, anger, jealousy, patriotism,—as in such plays as George Middleton's "The Cheat of Pity," Fenn and Price's "'Op-o'-Me-Thumb," Marion Craig Wentworth's "War Brides," and Zona Gale's "Neighbors." In any case, every play embodies a theme no matter how general or remote; for no reasonable plot can be related, no

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character revealed, no significant situation presented, no dramatic forces effectively handled to a given outcome, unless there be a theme to give them direction. The high technical and artistic qualities of the One-act play, when it is at its best, and the singleness and unity of impression which it must leave in the mind and heart of the audience, make it well nigh imperative that the One-act form must be about something that is specific, definite, and complete.

It must be emphasized that the One-act play strives for *impression*, not for conviction or conversion. A play made to the order of a moral precept or a philosophical propaganda is very apt to reveal its source, and that, too, at the expense of its dramatic value. Conviction or conversion may, in given cases, result from a play; but they are not the function of drama. Indeed a play is none the worse for having a definite opinion of life behind it, but it must not protrude itself at the expense of the larger values of human life. "The play really great," says Mr. A. B. Walkley, "is the play which first stirs our emotions profoundly and then gives a meaning and direction to our feelings by the unity and truth of some underlying idea." No play, and least of all the One-act form, is concerned with didacticism and propagandism: its aim is not to point a moral

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or to emphasize one's philosophy of life. Propagandism is all right in its place but it is a mighty bloodless substitute for the real motive force of a play. The One-act play aims to body forth some truth or some impression of life; but in dealing with these truths and impressions, the play does not aim to discuss them, or to expound them, much less advocate or argue them. The moral might be suggested and hinted at; in no event, however, should it be made the obvious didactic purpose of the play.

Entertainment, not argument, is the function of a good play; to reveal life, not to arouse dispute, is another element; and to provoke emotional response, not to advocate a policy, is a third. Just because a theme may be important and because the development thereof may stimulate thought, there is no reason why it should stir up dispute. Argumentation has no place in the One-act play. If the playwright attempt to solve or to interpret any problem which society finds problematical, he is engaging in a dangerous procedure. If the human race has not yet found a clear answer to a question of vital consequence, it is because the question is involved and has not yet been solved along lines of human nature. Charles Frohman, in explaining his refusal even to read propaganda plays on the labor question and woman suffrage, said: "If the author does not

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take sides, his play has no conclusion; if he does take sides, he offends at least half his audience." A good play must indeed be entertaining, but it may be something more without degenerating into a sermon or a treatise. A play that is a philosophical bore cannot claim absolution on the ground that it is a valuable sermon. Horace has well written,

"But he who precept with amusement blends,  
And charms the fancy while the heart he mends,  
Wins every suffrage."

### THE STRUCTURAL VALUE OF A THEME

It is singleness of impression that identifies the One-act play as a distinctive dramatic art-form, more than any other one thing. Just as the incidents and forces in the play lead to a final outcome, so, also, must they produce a dominant impression. Scattered impressions and uncertainty of emphasis mean no impression at all; no impression at all means that there is nothing tangible, nothing definite upon which the mind naturally seeks to lay hold. Not to have a definite theme in a play means that it violates a fundamental psychological law.

For structural reasons, if for no other, a theme and a definite intent on the part of the author are necessary to secure that well-ordered

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unity so essential to a finished art product. Structurally speaking, a dramatist cannot be sure of his way unless he knows where he is going. A careful study of Anton Tchekov's "A Marriage Proposal," August Strindberg's "Pariah," and Sir James M. Barrie's "The Twelve Pound Look," strongly indicate that these writers aimed at definite effects. The end in view and the impression to be made very largely determine both the selection of materials and the method of development and construction whether in building a house or in writing a One-act play. To secure a definite and unified effect, unity of treatment, of tone, of idea, and of purpose are essentially fundamental. Not only is this unity of impression essential but its very intensity depends upon its purpose and nature. The end in view is an all important structural consideration; there can be no plan, no construction, no procedure until the playwright has definitely determined, in his own mind at least, what that end is to be. Dumas *père* said, "You should not begin your work until you have your concluding scene, movement and speech clear in your mind. How can you tell what road you ought to take until you know where you are going." A singleness of theme and intent is essential to unity and completeness of structure.

It is wholly within reason and logic to as-

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sume that a One-act play actually constructed and developed with a definite theme and intent in mind is most likely to possess both the unity and the simplicity, to say nothing of buoyancy and freshness, which a good play requires. Purposeless scenes in and from actual life are apt to be digressive and uncertain; frequently they use incident and character in such a way as to distract rather than concentrate the powers of attention. Mere story-telling without a definite end in view is likely to become involved and intricate beyond the bounds of dramatic unity and dramatic art. A character play, too, without a motivating force may not have a satisfactory unifying principle; whereas a play that deliberately sets out to produce a given emotional effect is very likely to be held by its very intent to organic oneness. It is highly desirable, then, for structural reasons, that the One-act play have a definite theme.

Again, if there is a definite effect to be had, this will preclude to a minimum the possibility of erratic digression,—a thing wholly foreign to the art of the One-act form. A singleness of intent, likewise, will eliminate the danger of false emphasis on unessentials and will enhance the probabilities of nice proportion. Instead of indirectness and haziness, there will result directness, swiftness, and brevity. From the point of view of dramatic construction, an ob-

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jective point, a definite intent is the "governor" in the "dramatic engine"; it determines the material, the method, and the movement of the whole.

To the beginner in dramatic writing, nothing can be more valuable, and surely nothing is more fundamental, than a determination on his part to produce a definite emotional effect. A writer with a serious intent and dominating theme will not go far astray. If he is sure of his outcome, there is less likelihood of illogical dramatic movement: the plot will move directly forward to the final outcome. His characterization will be consistent; his sense of relations and situations will be constant and intense. There will be no important situations unprepared for, no melodramatic surprises, and a minimum of artificiality in effects. Above all, knowing what effect he is to get, he will be sure to stop when that effect is reached, a thing which by no means a few playwrights are unable to do. In a word, to develop a play from a single intent is the sole means by which a writer of the One-act play may hope to insure his work against obvious defects in selection of materials and in constructional excellence.

Again, if the writer of the One-act play knows intensively just what kind of effect he wishes to secure, the chances are that the theme is so essentially a part of his own inner

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being and emotional nature, that the very intent itself is the very source of his own dramatic zeal. A desire to make others think, feel, and want to do and to be is really the fountain head of one's own dramatic power. Zeal, devotion, interest, enthusiasm on the part of the playwright, provoke corresponding emotional functioning in the minds of the audience. The author of "War Brides" must have felt keenly on the subject of the sacredness of marriage and motherhood, else the play could not possibly be so moving when seen upon the stage with Nazimova in the leading rôle. George Middleton, according to his own testimony, has felt keenly about the various aspects of the problems of modern woman; accordingly, his One-act plays dealing with these subjects, arouse one's appreciation of these problems as never before. Anton Tchekov must have appreciated the humorous aspects of Russian life else he could not have written "The Boor" and "A Marriage Proposal." No author can feel dramatically or can write dramatically unless he is intently zealous in what he desires to do—unless he knows what impression he wishes to leave in the minds and hearts of his audience.



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### SOURCES AND NATURE OF DRAMATIC THEMES

Just how and where a playwright obtains his theme is quite a relative matter; time, place, occasion, stimulus, etc., are wholly varying elements. At least one precept at this point is vital: in general, it is not really conducive to good play-making deliberately to choose a theme in the sense of making one. Spontaneity and exuberance are characteristics of good drama; any artificiality in theme or in technique is very apt to forestall any such effect. One dramatist of consequence has said that his experience was that "you never deliberately choose a theme. You lie awake, or you go walking, and suddenly there flashes into your mind a contrast, a spiritual irony, an old incident carrying some general significance. Round this your mind broods, and there is the germ of your play. . . . It is not advisable for a playwright to start out at all unless he has so felt or seen something, that he feels, as it matures in his mind, that he must express it, and in dramatic form." Whatever the occasioning stimuli of individual themes may be, all, in the last analysis, come out of some experience or observation of life. The result may be light comedy, serious tragedy, melodrama, farce, fantasy, light entertainment, or what you will;

the motive force thereof has had its origin in life of some sort.

George Middleton has given the impression that the themes of his large group of One-act plays dealing with significant aspects of modern social life, particularly aspects of the life of woman, were had from direct observation of current life. Obviously Anton Tchekov's "The Boor" and "A Marriage Proposal" came from intimate knowledge of the peasant life of Russia; and one is of the opinion that August Strindberg's "Countess Julie," "The Stronger," "Pariah" and "Facing Death" reflect something of his own highly individual experiences and belief that men and women, and particularly women, are vampire-like creatures in their leech-like and blood-sucking effects upon each other. One feels, too, that the authors of "Modesty," "Rosalie," "Charming Leandre," "The Post Scriptum," and "Indian Summer" were thoroughly familiar with social aspects of French life; and certainly Giuseppe Giacosa's "The Wager" reveals a knowledge of Italian life. A careful study of Arthur Schnitzler's "Anatol" plays and of his "The Green Cockatoo," "Paracelsus," and "The Companion" shows them to be the epitome of the highly cultivated and rather superficial life of the aristocratic classes of present-day Vienna. The symbolic and mystic "The Intruder" of Maurice Maeterlinck is,

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no doubt, an expression of his own philosophical sub-conscious and half-realized feelings. Hermann Sudermann's three plays of "Morituri" ("Teja," "Fritschen," and "The Eternal Masculine") savor of a knowledge of the spirit and tone of Prussian life; and Sir James M. Barrie's recent One-act war play, "Der Tag," was undoubtedly provoked by more or less personal experience, observation, and feeling. Furthermore, Susan Glaspell and Alice Gerstenberg must have a keen sense of appreciation of feminine nature else they could not well have written "Suppressed Desires" and "Overtones." It may be concluded that the playwright need not hope to write very successful plays unless he have a sympathetic and intimate knowledge of the life from which he gets his dramatic themes. To know life means that one appreciates and feels its dynamic forces; and a recognition of dynamic forces as they come together in situations, crises, and crucial moments is an essential in dramaturgy.

Whatever be the individual source, there is always somewhere a germinal idea, a germinal feeling, or a germinal situation or character study, which serves as the motive force to set the constructive imagination to work; it is that from which it receives its original impulse. While this is the starting point and often the chief intent of the play, it is not always, in fact

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seldom, the beginning of the actual plotting and subsequent development. It is, however, that which awakens the consciousness of the writer to the dramatic possibilities of a story. Oftentimes it is a mere suggestion, or rather vague and indefinite impression which does not crystallize into something unified, tangible, and specific until by accident or otherwise it assumes dramatic shape and power. Rarely does the germinal idea reveal just what kind of play will result; this is a matter for subsequent development, a problem in constructive technique. The general idea may be serious, comic, or even light and fanciful; it can be graceful, amusing, and airy,—but triviality kills it. In a word, the best One-act plays must have a telling theme, one that bears closely on some deep-rooted fact or principle of life.

The actual concrete sources of themes for One-act plays are many and varied. Actual current happenings, episodes, incidents in everyday life; conversations, exchange of ideas and sentiments with acquaintances; suddenly aroused emotional functioning provoked by reading, by hearing a story or a lecture, or by observing some moving scene; one's own personal experiences of a more or less significant nature—comic or tragic; newspaper accounts of happenings which seem to sum up the outcome of antecedent causes real or imaginary;

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suddenly conceived ideas, or sudden impulses; study of human motives and human personalities among one's associates; and particularly the author's own study of his own self with a view to determining his own real inner nature—these are some of the specific sources from which, as in a twinkling of an eye, a dramatic theme may come to one's consciousness. Once recognized, once its dramatic power felt, the theme in embryo is a distinctive motive force in the future development of the play as it gradually shapes itself into form.

Above all, the theme must be one that is dramatic and will lend itself readily to dramatic handling. In the first place, it must be able to be emphasized in such way that it will appeal to the assembled group; it must provoke their attention and emotional response. It must appeal to those large and basic motives in human life. Hervieu's "Modesty" appeals because it emphasizes the fact that however much a woman may think that she wishes to be dealt with frankly and bluntly, innately she is susceptible to appeals to her vanity and flattery. Lady Gregory's "Hyacinth Halvey" appeals to the observations of human kind that a good reputation, quite as much as a bad one, cannot easily be lived down. In the second place, the theme must be able to be developed through a plot into a significant and final dramatic situation.

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An audience does not respond to any uncertainty in the outcome; there must be a finale, a complete ending. William Butler Yeats's "The Hour-Glass," Arthur Schnitzler's "The Green Cockatoo," George Middleton's "Criminals," Fenn and Price's "'Op-o'-Me-Thumb," Anton Tchekov's "A Marriage Proposal," Lord Dunsany's "The Lost Silk Hat," Davis and Sheenan's "Efficiency," and Mary Aldis's "Extreme Unction" are illustrations. Another consideration is that a theme should be of such a nature as to give rise to some sort of dramatic inter-play of forces. Not all One-act plays give rise to a significant struggle—Lord Dunsany's "The Glittering Gate," Lady Gregory's "Spreading the News," Zona Gale's "Neighbors" are not characterized by a marked struggle—but, on the whole, a theme that has such latent possibilities in it that a struggle of some sort may come from it, is really quite desirable. A theme that lends itself to a dramatic struggle will have in it one element with which human nature is familiar, and to which the average audience readily responds.

## CHAPTER V

### THE PLOT OF THE ONE-ACT PLAY

#### IMPORTANCE AND NATURE OF PLOT

IN the preceding chapter, it was pointed out that, for practical constructive work, the first concern of the author of a One-act play is that he determine definitely the theme, and the dominant emotional effect which he wishes to carry to his audience. When he has once determined these two things, his next important consideration is how to present them to the assembled group. The answer to the question is that they are presented through plot and its ancillary elements. The theme of the play must be made manifest, else there is no effect; emotional functioning must be provoked, else there is no drama. Plot is the concrete exemplification whereby these ends may be secured.

In the natural course of events, the chances are that at the very time that the theme and intent of the play are developing into definite form the plot also is taking shape. The two processes are usually very closely interlinked; but for constructive purposes they should be clearly and separately conceived by the play-

wright. In the finished product, of course, theme and plot should be so subtly interwoven that the average person will conceive them as one. The dramatist, nevertheless, must be concerned with two problems: he must know the nature and purport of his single effect, and he must know by what constructive process he is to secure that end.

Whether the theme has grown out of the plot or the plot has grown out of the theme, plot is an unusually vital element in the One-act play. In this shorter form of drama, there is not always opportunity for the largest possibilities in characterization. For this reason one is safe in generalizing that, in the One-act play, plot comes first and characterization second; a good dramatic plot will often make amends for a certain lack of characterization, but characterization itself will never redeem triteness of plot. Moreover, a dramatic story—and a play cannot be anything else—in its very nature is a plot; a *dramatic* narrative without plot is inconceivable. A story of interplay of forces, under certain definite conditions with certain issues at stake, in the course of which there comes a crucial and final moment, has the very essence of plot. A strong injunction to the writer of the One-act form would be,—Look well to your plot!

There are a number of rather interesting



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definitions of plot. One critic has suggested that a plot is an exemplification or an illustration of a theme; or, that a plot is a dramatic instance illustrating a proposition. Another writer has stated that plot is a story whereby a theme is emphasized to the degree that it provokes the desired emotional response in the audience. A third, considering character as basic in plot, says that plot is a series of inter-related incidents and situations wherein character unconsciously reveals itself. Again, plot has been defined as the skeleton of a play. And Aristotle asserts that a plot "embraces not only the deeds, the incidents, the situations, but also the mental processes, and the motives which underlie the outward events or which result from them. It is the compendious expression for all these forces working together toward a definite end." From a literary point of view, these definitions are interesting and in individual cases, comprehensive; but, for constructive play-writing, they are not of much value. For working purposes, the matter of plot must be handled from a rationalized and structural point of view.

Since the One-act play has for its end a singleness of impression, it follows that the first essential element of its plot must be a specific dramatic situation. It is for this crucial dramatic situation that the One-act form exists;

and it is toward this end that all the ancillary elements of plot-development converge. In J. Hartley Manners' "Happiness," this dramatic situation lies in the realization by the blasé and luxury-sated *Mrs. Chrystal-Pole* that happiness, as expressed by the thoroughly-human working-girl, *Jenny*, is just "Lookin' forward." In George Middleton's "Criminals" the situation is that of *Mr. and Mrs. Alfred York's* recognition of the fact that they have reared their daughter, *Janet*, in innocence but also in ignorance, and that, on her wedding day, they have placed her nuptial bliss in jeopardy because they had not taught her the physical facts of life. In Sir James M. Barrie's "Der Tag," a strong and moving war play, the crucial dramatic situation is that wherein an Emperor is brought to the full realization of the fact that his own vanity and mis-directed ambition have impelled him to sign the declaration of war which plunged the European nations into a cataclysm of horror, and that even *Culture*, whom he had so proudly considered his own possession, abandons him and will no longer allow him to be her sole benefactor and champion. In August Strindberg's "Countess Julie," the crucial situation lies in *Julie's* full recognition that only by suicide can she escape the humiliation of her personality's having been overcome by the seducing *Jean*.

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The very basis of the plot of a One-act play is a determining crisis or situation in which the character usually realizes both his own personality and the circumstances under which it is made manifest. In such a moment a whole character is emphasized in the act of meeting a significant and often crucial test. A significant and vital crucial moment is the basic element in the plot of a One-act play.

In constructing a plot, the dramatist must not confuse situation with incident. An incident is but a more or less accidental happening, an individual group of details forming a complete interest in themselves; the group has no relation to any other group either preceding or following. The essential basis of situation is *relation*—active relations between character and incident. A situation is a series of details which cohere into a singleness of impression. An incident is apart from consequences or from causes; a situation presents concrete and significant relations between persons and persons and between persons and incidents or circumstances. A crucial and dramatic situation is the result of antecedent causes; it is always related to a current or series of events, and, if considered wholly by itself, is incomplete. A dramatic situation is an active, causal relationship between character and incident.

The elements, then, of plot in a One-act play

are incident and character so inter-reacting one upon the other as to give rise to a dramatic situation. More specifically stated, plot is always active, ever changing, constantly moving from one relation to another,—and that too with increasing significance and interest. Incident alone does not constitute plot; nor does character alone produce plot. An incident or happening that does not affect some human being is not an element of a plot; and a human character whose personality does not affect incident cannot possibly be a moving dramatic force. Character in relation to incident is the motive force in dramatic plot.

Accordingly, plot—a sequential and dramatic inter-play of forces leading to a crucial moment—results when characters of certain individualized personalities are brought together into relation with each other under certain well-defined and individual circumstances. Because of the very nature of the personalities and of the incidents or circumstances, there is set up inter-reaction, and a series of situations results. This inter-reaction evolved to a conclusive ending is the plot. One situation stimulates the characters to react upon each other only to enter upon a second situation in which the relations between characters and between characters and incidents are somewhat different from what they were before; the new situation again

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stimulates the characters to action and reaction with the result that a third relation comes into being, in which characters and incidents are on a different footing again. There is no standing still; one situation but gives rise to the next and the next to the following one until a crucial moment is reached. There is a progressive evolution until the inter-play among characters and incidents comes to a significant finality. Character and incident are the vital elements in plotting.

The writer of the One-act play who expects to evolve a plot by "letting his character develop," and by this alone; and who does not take into consideration incident and its dramatic influence, is going on a fool's errand. The chances are that if he let his character work out its own end irrespective of incident, there will be no end. It is the business and the prerogative of the dramatist so to conceive and so to handle both character and incident as to secure the end and singleness of effect that he wishes to get across the foot-lights into the minds and hearts of the assembled group: he must put his own constructive technique into the working of his plot. The playwright must use *incident* as well as character as plot factors; both are determining elements in plot-building. If the determinants are one-sided, there results but little inter-reaction and conse-

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quently little or no plot-action. "A plot," says Professor Pitkin, "is a climactic series of events each of which both determines and is determined by the character involved." If events alone shape the destiny of character, then it is a passive victim of circumstances; and if character has no incident to serve as a stimulus or as a re-acting force, then there is nothing that will give rise to situation or to the development of its latent personality. In evolving his plot, the playwright must so handle character and incident that there will be inter-reaction among them—each factor influencing and moulding the other.

The opening and the first movement of Lord Dunsany's "The Lost Silk Hat," a delightful social comedy, is a happy illustration of the inter-play of character upon character and of character on incident, giving rise to a progressive series of situations. It should be noted that incident as well as character gives rise to each succeeding situation.

The *Caller* stands on a doorstep, "faultlessly dressed" but without a hat. At first he shows despair, then a new thought engrosses him.

Enter the *Laborer*.

*Caller*: Excuse me a moment. Excuse me—but—I'd be greatly obliged to you if—if you could see your way—in fact, you can be of great service to me if——

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*Laborer:* Glad to do what I can, Sir.

*Caller:* Well, all I really want you to do is just to ring that bell and go up and say—er—say that you've come to see the drains, or anything like that, you know, and get hold of my hat for me.

*Laborer:* Get hold of your 'at!

*Caller:* Yes. You see, I left my hat behind most unfortunately. It's in the drawing-room (points to window), that room there, half under the long sofa, the far end from the door. And if you could possibly go and get it, why I'd be (The *Laborer's* expression changes)—Why, what's the matter?

*Laborer:* (firmly) I don't like this job.

*Caller:* Don't like this job! But my dear fellow, don't be silly, what possible harm——?

*Laborer:* Ah-h. That's what I don't know.

*Caller:* But what harm can there possibly be in so simple a request? What harm does there seem to be?

*Laborer:* Oh, it seems all right.

*Caller:* Well, then.

*Laborer:* All these crack jobs do seem all right.

*Caller:* But I'm not asking you to rob the house.

*Laborer:* Don't seem as if you are, certainly, but I don't like the looks of it; what if

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there's things what I can't help taking when I gets inside?

*Caller:* I only want my hat—Here, I say, please don't go away—here's a sovereign, it will only take you a minute.

*Laborer:* *What I want to know—*

*Caller:* Yes?

*Laborer:* —Is what's *in* that hat?

*Caller:* What's *in* the hat?

*Laborer:* Yes; that's what I want to know.

*Caller:* What's *in* the hat?

*Laborer:* Yes, you aren't going to give me a sovereign——?

*Caller:* I'll give you two sovereigns.

*Laborer:* You aren't going to give me a sovereign, and raise it to two sovereigns, for an *empty* hat?

*Caller:* But I must have my hat. I can't be seen in the streets like this. There's nothing *in* the hat. What do you think's in the hat?

*Laborer:* Ah, I'm not clever enough to say that, but it looks as if the papers was in that hat.

*Caller:* The papers?

*Laborer:* Yes, papers proving, if you can get them, that you're the heir to that big house, and some poor innocent will be defrauded.

*Caller:* Look here, the hat's absolutely empty. I *must* have my hat. If there's any-



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thing in it you shall have it yourself as well as the two pounds, only get me my hat.

*Laborer:* Well, that's seems all right.

*Caller:* That's right, then you'll run up and get it?

*Laborer:* Seems all right to me and seems all right to you. But it's the police what you and I have got to think of. Will it seem all right to them?

*Caller:* Oh, for heaven's sake——

*Laborer:* Ah!

*Caller:* What a hopeless fool you are.

*Laborer:* Ah!

*Caller:* Look here.

*Laborer:* Ah, I got you there, mister.

*Caller:* Look here, for goodness sake don't go.

*Laborer:* Ah! (Exit.)

### CHARACTERISTICS OF A DRAMATIC PLOT

If the author were writing a short-story or a novel, much of the action of the plot could be narrated and the reader would take it for granted. In the case of the dramatist, however, he is not writing for the reader, but primarily for the audience in the play-house. In this case, he cannot narrate the action but must reveal and show it largely through concrete objective movement and pantomime. The actions

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must be seen by the audience and not merely told to them. In the chapter on *The Dramatist and His Audience*, it was asserted that an audience gets the dramatic action of a plot largely through seeing the pantomime of the play and that it really gives but casual attention to what is said by the characters. In the play-house seeing is believing. Accordingly, the vital characteristic of the action of a plot is the concrete, objective pantomime. There are many cases on record in which a person, unable to hear a word of the dialogue or wholly unable to understand the language in which the play was written, got the full effect of the large emotional values of the play and readily followed the plot through to the end, by observing the plot-pantomime and accompanying stage-business. Without speaking a word of dialogue throughout the entire performance, Mlle. Dazie played Sir James M. Barrie's "Pantaloons" to capacity vaudeville audiences who readily got the plot from the pantomimic action. Indeed, a good dramatic plot is essentially a pantomime story.

Moreover, a good One-act play is generally characterized by psychological and emotional functionings of one kind or another; and these are most effective when they are manifest in concrete and objective pantomime. As a matter of fact, from a psychological point of view,

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this is the only way by which they can be expressed. The dramatist, in evolving and constructing his plot, should so get hold of the essential emotional values in his story that he can best reveal them through significant pantomimic action. It is what the audience sees, not what it hears, that will impress them. Such One-act plays as Lewis Beach's "The Clod," Richard Harding Davis's "Blackmail," Anton Tchekov's "A Marriage Proposal," and August Strindberg's "The Outlaw," may readily be interpreted through the inherent pantomimic action of their plots.

A second characteristic of the plot of a One-act play is that it must be fundamentally dramatic: the underlying situation must be a significant and vital one; it must provoke one's interest through a series of minor situations which culminate in a final crucial moment; and it must provoke emotional response of such force as to make the spectator feel that he has experienced or observed some aspect of life. A plot that is not dynamic and moving is scarcely suitable for a One-act play. Unless the personalities and incidents are vital and unless they are significant as a revelation of some aspect of human life, there is no drama. They cannot be trite commonplaces or superficialities. The initial incident, or initial force of whatever nature, which sets the inter-reaction

into motion may be trivial, but the resultant must make or mar the character—must have some definite effect. The result of the struggle or inter-play of character and incident must be of more than usual concern to the personalities.

The incidents and situations of George Middleton's "Criminals" are vital to *Mr. and Mrs. Alfred York* and their daughter, *Janet*, and likewise to *Carter Merwin* who, but an hour before, had become her husband. The incidents and situations of Alfred Sutro's "The Bracelet," as experienced by *Mr. and Mrs. Harvey Western*, are a distinctive lesson to the two, and to the husband in particular. The experience of the *Wise Man* in William Butler Yeats's "The Hour-Glass," brings him face to face with life and with death, and presents to him a conception of faith the like of which he never had known before; and in "The Well of the Saints,"<sup>1</sup> *Martin Doul* and his wife *Mary* learn that happiness and bliss under a condition of total blindness is preferable to the contention and bitter disappointment they experienced in the few moments during which their sight was restored. In Lord Dunsany's "The Lost Silk Hat," the *Caller* finally succumbs to the lure of romance. In Zona Gale's "Neighbors," the incidents which come to the experience of the characters arouse a sympathy and latent devo-

<sup>1</sup> A three-act play.

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tion that otherwise might have continued to lie dormant. In August Strindberg's "Countess Julie," the experiences of *Julie* teach her that she cannot play with fire and not get burned. Her whole nature is outraged and brought to a tragic and bitter end because of her experience with the seducing *Jean*. The author of a One-act play will do well to see to it that the material of his plot has to do with vital events; and this holds true whether he write comedy or tragedy.

The plot which does not arouse interest in the audience will be of little value for any kind of fiction narrative, and least of all of value for a One-act play. The basis of interest is a constantly progressive series of stimuli of so taking a nature as to seize and hold all the powers of perception and thought. Probably the strongest source of stimuli in a play is situation. Psychology emphasizes the fact that the human mind is not inclined to create a situation, but is wont to attempt to solve it the moment it is presented. Accordingly, one way, by which a practical playwright can arouse and seize interest, is by presenting to the assembled group a series of concrete situations in such way as to invite solution thereof. If the dramatist will but present a series of vital situations, he will not need to do much else; the mind will naturally rise to the occa-

sion. For, as Melville Davisson Post has said, "The demand of the human mind for mystery or problem—something to unravel—is universal. It is the desire of everybody to know how persons will act in tragic situations; how men of individuality and power in high places will conduct themselves under certain conditions of stress. We shall never cease to be interested in these things, and the author who presents them will have our attention."<sup>1</sup>

According to psychology, anything that is obvious will not readily seize the powers of interest. If a scene, an injected bit of motivation, a relation, a situation, or a bit of action is too evident or too obvious, there is nothing for the mind to solve, nothing to interest it. If the characters are of too commonplace a type, if the series of situations is not vital and of significance to the characters, and if the crucial moment does not provoke some strong emotional reaction—there is no stimulus to provoke the mind to be concerned. Anything that is commonplace and wholly familiar, and any situation out of which the natural course of events and habitual human actions will lead a character, calls for no solution for there is no problem to grapple with. Interest is provoked by any situation from which one's human instincts and habits of life do not automatically

<sup>1</sup> *Saturday Evening Post* for December 26, 1914.

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deliver one. Such a situation calls for some solution and the human mind, having clearly conceived the situation, if it is at all of consequence to a human character, attempts a solution,—in a word, interest is provoked. Obviously, the injunction to the playwright should be,—Look well to your series of situations, if you would arouse and hold the interest of your audience!

The whole experience of human life is a struggle with environment, an effort to overcome obstacles of one kind or another; life is a continuous endeavor to surmount. Life, then, is a continuous attempt at solving problems, difficulties, and situations. To interest the audience, the dramatist must present for its solution the very vital problems with which it has had association and acquaintance. A problem or a situation that, in the experience of human life, has had no solution and cannot have any, is, therefore, uninteresting; and a situation whose solution would be of no vital concern or whose solution is wholly obvious, again is of little interest. The larger vital situations of life, whose way of solution is not always certain because of ever varying attendant circumstances in any given case, but whose solution, in one way or another, is highly probable, are the ones which invariably seize the interest of an audience.

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In the third place, if a plot is to be dramatic—and the plot of a play cannot be otherwise—it must provoke the observer to emotional response. Usually, a person responds to those things with which he has sympathetic acquaintance and understanding. A person who has a good sense of humor best appreciates a good joke; a pious man usually feels most keenly about sacrilege and piety; a refined and literate woman has a fine sense of decorum; a self-made man most often appreciates the struggles of a hard-working and ambitious youth. Men and women who have experienced the ills of fortune are most sympathetic with the unfortunate; and the old soldier is aroused to a pitch of patriotic enthusiasm at the sound of the fife and drum, the like of which cannot be understood by the casual observer. It is to those things which are strongest in human likes and dislikes that an audience responds most readily and most intently. The dramatist will do much to make his product dramatic if he will put into his plot those things about which men and women feel most keenly.

Moreover, to arouse the audience to emotional functioning—tears, laughter, sympathy, repugnance, anger, revenge, love, hate, patriotism, sacrifice, fidelity—is not only the purpose of a play, but is also the prerogative and the opportunity of the playwright. Such plays as



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Sir James M. Barrie's "Der Tag," Fenn and Price's "'Op-o'-Me-Thumb," Mary Aldis's "Extreme Unction" stir the emotions to the depths; Anton Tchekov's "The Boor," Alice Gerstenberg's "Overtones," Edward Goodman's "Eugenically Speaking," Percival Wilde's "The Noble Lord" are thoroughly laughter provoking. The basic thing in human life is emotion, not thought. The One-act play must stir, arouse, and move the emotions, if it is to be of any practical value. The dramatist must move his audience so that they will feel that they have experienced one of the motive forces of life: they may weep at a really pathetic scene; they may shout approval at the overthrow of one who has not played the game of life fairly; they may laugh uproariously at a fat man's encounter with a mere wisp of a washer-woman; they may well with warmth and fervor at a patriotic and heroic achievement; or they may want to inflict severe punishment upon the one who, in the midst of the excitement of a national crisis, dares utter what they consider unpatriotic sentiments. Moving, the plot must be—else it is naught.

### STRUCTURAL ASPECTS OF A PLOT

The important structural problem before the playwright in building his plot for his One-

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act play is, that all his materials and methods shall lend themselves to the securing of a singleness and unity of effect. This singleness of effect is most strongly emphasized and most highly effective in the crucial situation. For that reason, the dramatist must work with an eye single to the crucial moment. And he must reach this all-important situation by constructing a series of minor situations which progressively lead up to the ultimate end.

The prime concern in unity in plot building is that there shall be a *structural* unity. There is the unity of a plum-pudding, of a string of beads, and of a Greek temple! The first is but a lump unity—a conglomeration; the second is orderly, but only so by placement; and the last is structural, rationalized, organic. A group of incidents thrown together into a conglomerate mass, irrespective of causal relation among them, is but a hodge-podge and is wholly removed from consideration for a plot of a One-act play because it does not lend itself to a structural unity of effect. Moreover, a mere succession of incidents, or even of situations, however spirited and interesting, can no more make a dramatic plot than a mere succession of standing soldiers can make an army; both lack organization for a definite purpose. Again, mere coherence between a succession of incidents does not make a plot; for, as Aristotle

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has asserted, "there is a wide difference between incidents that follow *from* and incidents that follow only *after* each other." Mere coherence does not elevate the succession of incidents to the texture of drama. Nor does mere complexity make a plot, else any puzzle, conundrum, or scientific problem would be material for plot. Complexity may be little more than mechanical intricacy. It goes without saying that every good plot has an element of simplified complexity in it; but it is due to causal relations and organic interplay among incident and character rather than to any mechanical arrangement.

The structural problem for the dramatist in constructing his plot—and he really does construct it in the proper acceptation of the term—is that of incremental progression. A plot not only proceeds but also advances from causes to effects. There is not only a chronological relation between the situations of the plot but there is also a logical one. The playwright must so handle his material that there is a *series* of situations which progressively accumulate to a given end. In this cumulative progression there is also something of a process of exuviation. One situation grows out of a previous one only to become the basis for the one which follows. Each situation is causally and logically related and linked to the one

which precedes and to the one which follows, and likewise is a constructive element in the whole series of situations which produce the total effect. And this is the organic and structural unity of the Greek temple, which the playwright must have in his plot. The structural problem in plot-building is that of incremental progression leading to a crucial moment, the whole giving an artistic unity of effect. It is a problem of structural integration.

In the use of materials and situations the playwright is beset by two dangers: he may violate the element of unity either by putting too much into his plot or by putting in too little. If there is too much material, too many incidents and characters, too many effects, a profusion of dialogue and stage business, or too many real situations, the mind of the audience becomes cloyed and surfeited; there is confusion, there is no unity of effect and consequently no adequate emotional response to the stimuli. If, on the other hand, the playwright puts too little material into the plot, and especially if there are too few situations whereby the assembled group is gradually led up to the crucial moment, there is surprise, a shock to the senses; the whole seems mechanical and is therefore uninteresting and, above all, unconvincing. On the other hand, the human

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mind needs to have a stimulus repeated a number of times before it fully responds to it, and the stimuli must be increasingly and gradually stronger; accordingly there must be a sufficient number of situations dealing with the theme of the play or there will not be sufficient stimuli to provoke the desired emotional response at the crucial moment. That plot is perfect, so far as material is concerned, from which one is not impelled to remove anything and to which he is not desirous of making additions. It has a constructive and organic proportion.

In constructing the plot of a One-act play, it is highly imperative that the dramatist have the material thereof thoroughly in hand. He must get his emotional effects with the greatest possible economy of time and attention. To that end, he should subject his plot materials to such constructive questions as these: (1) What significant human truth or precept do I wish to emphasize and exemplify in a concrete illustration of life? (2) What emotional functioning do I wish to provoke in my audience,—particularly at the crucial moment? Is it a vital, fundamental, and dramatically moving emotion? Is it humorous or tragic? (3) What is the important crucial moment or situation in which this human truth and this emotional element are made most effective and clear? (4) What are the distinctive traits

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of personality in each of the dominant characters? Are they fundamentally dramatic traits? (5) What are the circumstances under which the personalities of the characters are brought together? Are the characters and circumstances inherently of such nature that, when brought together, they will re-act and inter-react one upon another? (6) What are the individual situations in which this reaction is most striking? Is each situation dramatic? Can they be arranged in a progressive series? (7) What is the reaction in character and adjustment in situation that immediately follow the crucial moment? In answering these questions, the author should not deceive himself as to the completeness of the answers; he should permit nothing short of absolute definiteness and clarity to stand. Indeed the success of the plot will depend very largely upon the results the author gets in subjecting his material to the rigid test of the foregoing questions.

A good dramatic plot is craftily premeditated. The playwright must know whether he is to get a tragic or a comic effect; whether he is to amuse by farce, burlesque, travesty, or to arouse by frank melodrama. Moreover, if he is an observing and practical dramatist, he will not write *down* to his public, nor will he soar into realms far *above* them. The efficient dramatist writes directly *to* his audience; he

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ever keeps it before him. He knows exactly what effect and emotional value he is to carry across the footlights to the assembled group and then builds his play by going back to the initial steps of his plot and constructing the series of dramatic situations that will incrementally progress to that end. *Construct the plot backward with the outcome ever in view*, is a valuable precept to the beginner in plot-building. The playwright will do well to keep in mind that it is far easier to work from effects back to causes than from causes forward to effects. The first process, too, is far more conducive to unified plotting because the end in view is always a guiding and unifying motive. In any case, the practical playwright clearly conceives the structure of his plot before he begins to write his play.

### SOURCES AND MATERIALS OF A PLOT

The writer of the One-act play should keep in mind that his finished product, when well done, is a work of art,—he has secured an effect through constructive means to an end. From this, it may be pointed out that he should not expect to find his plot ready made in active every-day life. Indeed the *material* for a plot is often to be found in life, but the plot itself is built and constructed. The first concern of

the dramatist should not be character, setting, dialogue, or stage business, but it should be the construction of his plot. For the beginner, this seems to be a most difficult restraint; if he could have his way, he would dash off his ideas and emotions at white heat. In such a case, he would, in all probability, over-emphasize some one thing or else fluctuate from one thing to another,—at one time plot, then dialogue, then character, and then something else. Unless his plot is clearly and vividly before him, he would better postpone any diversified spontaneous outburst until that matter has been taken care of. Whatever else his result might be, the chances are that if he does not construct his plot before he begins to write, it will not be a One-act play that is a finished work of art.

There is very little plot in real life. A plot whose greatest recommendation is that it is an actual happening and is, therefore, a “true story,” is usually in greatest danger of being a flabby invertebrate. Such a story seldom succeeds, because real life seldom falls into a well-ordered series of situations leading to a crucial moment. A good play is not photographic, is not necessarily true to the facts of a given bit of actual living; but a good play is always true to life in the by and large. The practical playwright constructs this picture of life out of the materials of active life; seldom,



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however, is it an exact reproduction of the details of a bit of living. If any incident of a plot may be omitted without breaking the vital sequence of cause and effect, then that incident must be eliminated. If it is necessary to invent an incident in order to complete or to emphasize more effectively a series developing a dramatic theme, then it must be forthcoming. Here, too, is the fundamental difference between art and life. In life one is plunged into a complete welter of experiences, most of which have little or no causal relation to each other. Surprise, accident, things unpredictable, come into life. In art, on the other hand, there are no mere happenings unprepared for; every situation is anticipated by its vital cause and may be observed if one will but see. It is of no consequence whether certain incidents did or did not happen to a real being in active life; the dramatist must so handle them that in all probability they did happen. Art is constructive to a given end; life is not. Life, as revealed in a One-act play, is made rational and logical; in short, it is art.

In the matter of plot-building the constructive value of the testimony of two masters, Stevenson and Poe, in the field of fiction writing cannot be gainsaid. Stevenson in "A Humble Remonstrance" writes, "Let him choose a motive, whether of character or passion; care-

fully construct his plot so that every incident is an illustration of the motive, and every property employed shall bear to it a relation of congruity or contrast, . . . and allow neither himself in the narrative, nor any character in the course of the dialogue, to utter one sentence that is not part and parcel of the business of the story or the discussion of the problem involved." "If wise," says Poe, "he has not fashioned his thoughts to accommodate his incidents; but having conceived, with deliberate care, a certain unique or single effect to be wrought out, he then invents such incidents—he then combines such events as may best aid him in establishing the pre-conceived effect. If his very initial sentence tend not to the out-bringing of this effect, then he has failed in his first step. In the whole composition there should be no word written, of which the tendency, direct or indirect, is not to the one pre-established design." When past-masters such as these two men speak after this fashion, the beginner in playwriting will do well to conceive clearly that the real problem in plot-building is not one of making a detailed transfer of the literal facts of life to the stage, but one of organic construction.

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### ORGANIC DIVISIONS OF A PLOT

In conclusion, then, the general constructive plan of plot-building is that it shall have a definitely planned series of situations which will take the audience step by step, and with increasing interest, to the highest point in the dramatic action. "Every drama," says Adolphus W. Ward, "should represent in organic sequence the several stages of which a complete action consists, and which are essential to it. Every action conceived of as complete, has its causes, growth, height, consequence and close." Expressed from a little different point of view, there is a complication, a major knot, and an explanation; or stated in still another way, it may be said that a plot is a complication followed by an explanation, a tying followed by an untying, a nouement followed by a dénouement.

A reputable critic of fiction holds that a plot consists of three movements: First, (1) setting, (2) characters, (3) generating circumstances; Second, (1) complication, (2) reaction of characters to it; Third, (1) crucial situation, and (2) dénouement. Another writer asserts that a plot consists of "First, the complicating influence and the response of some of the persons thereto (initial response); second, period of resistant delay, in which the episodes or stages

of the conflict march along each duly following those that belong before it in point of time; third, the act, or incident, or other decisive fact that pre-determines the final outcome; and fourth, the outcome itself, either alone or telescoping with and practically one with number three."

For analytical work the foregoing schemes are highly valuable and are not to be taken lightly; on the other hand in constructive work in plotting, especially for the beginner, there is danger of too complex a method. The constructive method of plot-building may grow more and more complex as the skill of the playwright develops; at the outset, however, a more simplified and yet effective plan is to be preferred. Whatever else may be said about the general structural aspects of a plot, this is obvious to every one: a plot begins at some point, ends at some point, and there is something in between. Indeed, laboratory experience in teaching One-act playwriting in the University class room has led to the conclusion that, for practical constructive work, it is best to consider a plot as having a **BEGINNING**, a **MIDDLE**, and an **END**. The Beginning contains the preliminaries out of which the subsequent dramatic action grows; the Middle contains the progressive series of situations, including the crucial

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moment, which exemplify the dramatic movement, and the End includes the re-actions of character and the re-adjustment of relations immediately following the crucial moment.

## CHAPTER VI

### THE BEGINNING OF THE ONE-ACT PLAY

#### THE STRUCTURAL ASPECTS OF THE BEGINNING

JUST as the theme and the plot of a good One-act play are so skilfully interwoven as to give something of a sense of oneness, so the simple organic structural divisions of a plot—Beginning, Middle, and End—must be so deftly interrelated that there will not be even the least obvious breaking up of the structure into these elements. There must be a smooth and logical development from the Beginning through the Middle to the End; there must be no sense of division between any two of these parts in the finished product. If there is, then the play is not art, it is only mechanics.

From the point of view of art, the Beginning of a One-act play is a thoroughly integral and organic part of the whole plot. It does not exist for itself alone; it must never end in a blank wall. Structurally and artistically it is inseparable from the rest of the play: it is a homogeneous structural part of the complete plot. On the other hand, experience in practical play-writing has shown that the dramatist

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must conceive the Beginning as a problem almost wholly in and of itself; it has a distinctive dramatic function to perform and has certain structural characteristics peculiarly its own. This function and these characteristics the playwright must conceive clearly; and he must deal with the problem in structure as a specific consideration. The practical craftsman never loses sight of the mechanics of his art.

Dumas *filis* had in mind practical structural plot-building when he wrote, "You should not begin your work until you have your concluding scene, movement and speech clear in your mind. How can you tell what road you ought to take until you know where you are going?" If the Beginning is dull, weak, awkward, and above all listless and uninteresting, one may rest assured that the dramatist has either a very vague conception of its function or does not understand the organic relation between the Beginning and the plot as a whole. If a playwright finds that he cannot make his opening clear and comprehensible without long, prolix explanation of an intricate network of facts and forces, he may be pretty sure that he has hold of a bad story, one that stands in sore need of simplification or one that is not dramatic enough to warrant being put into a One-act play. Organically, the Beginning is that por-

tion of the plot-facts which make plain to the audience enough of the character-traits and circumstances involved to enable them to understand the whole plot-action.

It cannot be too strongly emphasized that while the Beginning is something of a dramatic problem in itself, it must ever be conceived in relation to the entire plot. The essence of plot and the very reason for its being, in a One-act play, is the crucial moment—the outcome. Robert Wilson Neal, although writing about the structure of the short-story rather than about a One-act play, said, "Every play has its outcome. This implies that there has, in the course of the action, been either a change or an imminent likelihood of change, from one state of things to another; the change took place, or else it was averted. This in turn implies that, to understand this change and the manner in which it came about or was averted, we must know what the state of things was at the time when the action began. The purpose of the exposition in plot is to make known this state of affairs from which there is to be a change, or in which (after a period of struggle or critical uncertainty) change is to be averted. That is, the function of the exposition is to make the story clear by putting before us the facts that belong to the beginning of the plot." Perceive the End in the Beginning and never



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lose sight of it, is a constructive precept for the beginner in dramatic composition.

At the very same time that the playwright is informing the audience of the initial situation he must also be revealing what has preceded and likewise indicate what is probably to follow. The Beginning does not exist altogether for its own sake; its individual value very largely ceases as soon as it leads the assembled group to a point where, of its own accord, it desires to follow further the dramatic development. If the very initial situation does not tend to the out-bringing of the final crucial effect then it is on the wrong track and has failed of its dramatic function and obligation. The playwright must ever keep clearly before him that the Beginning is an organic and structural part of the complete preëstablished design.

### FUNCTION AND CHARACTERISTICS OF A DRAMATIC BEGINNING

The importance of the Beginning cannot be gainsaid. The one-hundred yard dash in an athletic contest is often won by the sprinter who "gets off" most effectively at the start; many a book remains unread because the first dozen pages do not arouse interest or because there is a dissatisfying vagueness; and the practised public speaker knows from personal

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experience that, if he is to hold the attention and interest of his audience, he must make the most of the first few minutes of his address. An ex-United States senator, in an exemplary discourse before a University convocation, once asserted that there were three essentials of a good speech: First, that it should begin at an interesting and significant point; Second, that it should stop when it was at an end; and Third, that it should have something worth while in between. From a structural point of view, nothing could be more applicable to the One-act play. Of these elements the Beginning is by no means the least important; and in no sense is it, from the conventional rhetorical point of view, a formal introduction to a bit of prose discourse.

To any one who has a clear conception of the organic structure of a One-act play the obvious function of the Beginning is to *make the audience cognizant of the initial situation out of whose characters and attendant circumstances the subsequent complete dramatic action will evolve*. It must make clear the inherent personalities of the characters and must likewise present the accompanying circumstances so vividly that the audience, grasping the significance of the situation, will feel that something of vital import will, in all probability, develop. The situation thus presents a prob-

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lem, and this problem according to current psychology immediately seizes the interest of the assembled group.

As a concrete example of this effect, the Beginning of Sir James M. Barrie's moving war play, "Der Tag," may be cited.

A bare chamber lighted by a penny dip which casts shadows. On a hard chair by a table sits *An Emperor* in thought. To him come his *Chancellor* and an *Officer*.

*Chancellor:* Your Imperial Majesty——

*Officer:* Sire——

*Emperor:* (The Emperor rises) Is that the paper? (Indicating a paper in the Chancellor's hand.)

*Chancellor:* (Presenting it) It awaits only your Imperial Majesty's signature.

*Officer:* When you have signed that paper, Sire, the Fatherland will be at war with France and Russia.

*Emperor:* At last this little paper——

*Chancellor:* Not the value of a bird's feather until it has your royal signature. The——

*Emperor:* Then it will sing round the planet. The vibrations of it will not pass in a hundred years. . . . My friend, how still the world has grown since I raised this pen! All Europe's listening. Europe! That's Germany, when I have signed! And yet——

*Officer:* Your Imperial Majesty is not afraid to sign?

*Emperor:* (flashing) Afraid!

In this Beginning it is made thoroughly clear that a *Chancellor* and an *Officer* have presented a document—a declaration of war—to *An Emperor* for his signature. If signed it will put the Fatherland into war with France and Russia. It is, likewise, clearly revealed that the *Emperor* is the main character, and that he is ambitious, masterful, far-seeing, egotistic and autocratic. From the unfinished sentence, "And yet——," it is revealed that significant matters of far-reaching consequence are considerations that affect his signing. This is a situation of more than common interest; a vital problem is up for solution. Will the *Emperor* sign? Or will he not sign? In either case, what will be the result? The audience is interested and looks forward to a solution. Here is a tense situation; a serious tone and atmosphere obtains throughout the whole. The dialogue reveals individual personalities and is strongly dramatic: "All Europe's listening. Europe! That's Germany, when I have signed!" and the *Emperor* (flashing) "Afraid!" In this opening scene there is provided a strong sense of forceful characterization, of incident and situation, of dramatic atmosphere and tone

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—and the whole points forward to action of one kind or another.

Another apt illustration is from Lord Dunsany's delightful little comedy, "The Lost Silk Hat."

The *Caller* stands on a doorstep; "faultlessly dressed," but without a hat. At first he shows despair, then a new thought engrosses him.

Enter the *Laborer*.

*Caller*: Excuse me a moment. Excuse me—but—I'd be greatly obliged to you if—if you could see your way—in fact, you can be of great service to me if——

*Laborer*: Glad to do what I can, Sir.

*Caller*: Well, all I really want you to do is just ring that bell and go up and say—er—say that you've come to see the drains, or anything like that, you know, and get hold of my hat for me.

*Laborer*: Get hold of your 'at!

*Caller*: Yes. You see, I left my hat behind most unfortunately. It's in the drawing-room (points to window), that room there, half under the long sofa, the far end from the door, and if you could possibly go and get it, why I'd be—(The *Laborer's* expression changes)—Why, what's the matter?

*Laborer*: (firmly) I don't like this job.

Here, again, there is an initial dramatic situ-

ation—character and incident inter-reacting upon each other: A “faultlessly dressed” man is on a doorstep; but he has no hat. He cannot go through London streets without it, and yet he does not wish to go back up to a certain room and get it from under the far end of the sofa. A *Laborer* passes. The “faultlessly dressed” man very politely accosts him and urges the *Laborer* to go and get it for him. He shall invent the excuse that he has come up to see the drains, etc. Here is a dramatic situation of a highly comic nature. The problem for solution is, will the laborer get the hat or will he not? In either case what will be the result? If he doesn’t get it, who will, is a second problem that suggests itself. In this Beginning, as in the one from “Der Tag,” are the essentials of a good dramatic opening: (1) Characters are presented and somewhat personalized; (2) Incident and attendant circumstances are clearly put; (3) A dramatic situation obtains; (4) A problem arises; (5) The problem arouses interest; (6) A somewhat definite tone and atmosphere pervade the whole; (7) and there is an unmistakable pointing forth to further dramatic action.

The construction of an initial dramatic situation that will provoke the interest of the audience and will at the same time point forward to subsequent action, is the structural problem for

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the playwright who wishes to write a successful Beginning to a One-act play. He must remember that the audience is under no particular obligation to be interested in anything he may present before them on the stage; on the contrary, it is *his obligation* to see to it that his own work provokes their interest and emotional response. A successful opening is a vital test of the dramatist's skill; he will get the attention of the multitude and seize their interest only if he has craftsmanship enough to enlist it. In the Beginning, the author has opportunity—and it is his prerogative and his duty—to get to his public exactly what he would have them get; to have them think, see, feel, understand, and appreciate the initial dramatic situation just as he would have them. It is a problem in materials and craftsmanship. Sir James M. Barrie and Lord Dunsany did not, one may rest assured, write their Beginnings in a trice and without any forethought; there is ample evidence, when the plays are fully analyzed, that these openings were carefully wrought to a given end. The beginner in dramatic construction will do well to take heed of their example.

Condensation and clearness are the first two essential characteristics of a good opening of a One-act play. Vagueness and prolixity will kill any play. Economy of means, time, and attention is a prime consideration. At best,

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the full time allotted to the shorter form of drama is seldom much beyond the three-quarters of an hour mark; as a result, the Beginning, if done well, must be done quickly. For this part of the play, only a few minutes are at the disposal of the dramatist. Once the curtain is up, there is no time to tarry, every moment must be occupied; the playwright cannot stop to describe the scene, to narrate the circumstances, to expound character, or to do anything else that the writer of a novel or short-story might indulge. The play is on the moment the curtain goes up, and dramatic action and dramatic dialogue must be forthcoming without a moment's delay. Every second of this opening action counts heavily for or against the success of the play and the prospect of arousing the interests of the assembled group. There can be no leisurely starting such as one often sees in the long full-evening plays; here one is to run the hundred-yard dash rather than the mile race,—and the methods of beginning are essentially different. In the average One-act play, it is seldom that more than a page or two of printed matter is devoted to the Beginning. The opening parts of the most representative One-act plays are masterpieces of dramatic condensation and clarity.

Compression and economy of significant detail give a sense of intensity and rapidity of



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movement that is essentially dramatic. Any attempt to put *all* the details of expository material into the Beginning is sure to lead one to grief. All non-essentials must be eliminated: no more facts of incident or circumstance are to be given than are absolutely necessary; only those traits of character which give personality and dramatic bent are to be revealed; the situation is to be presented in its elemental simplicity rather than in any degree of unusual complexity. The whole is given tone, life, and human values by suggestive and connotative setting and dialogue.

Indeed, a good Beginning of a One-act play often gives one the sense of having plunged a bit abruptly into a situation; it seizes the interest at once, and directs it as soon as possible toward the essential action of the play. Lack of space prevents further illustration from typical plays, but such bits of work as Alfred Sutro's "The Bracelet," Percival Wilde's "The Traitor," Sir James M. Barrie's "The Twelve Pound Look," Lord Dunsany's "A Night at an Inn," Edgar Allan Woolf's satirical comedy, "The Lollard," are cases in point. On the other hand, there are many other quite as excellent One-act plays that do not begin so dramatically; moreover, they are none the less effective so far as clearness and condensation are concerned. An examination of Thomas H. Dickin-

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son's "In Hospital," J. Hartley Manners' "Happiness," Lewis Beach's "The Clod," William Butler Yeats's "The Hour-Glass," Zona Gale's "The Neighbors," Paul Hervieu's "Modesty," will reveal that these plays begin somewhat more leisurely. Prolixity of expository details, too elaborate attempts at characterization, are not conducive to that condensation, clarity, and directness of action so essential in the Beginning of a One-act play. The dramatist should seek to define character sharply and tensely. He should tell in a quick, searching, significant dialogue the facts that must be told. And he should let his opening scene, on which the following development depends, come with a snap and a perfectly adequate, but none the less have-done-with-it, effect. The play must begin, not merely start.

The most effective Beginning is that which connotes, that which suggests, that which reveals a great deal more than is given directly. A good opening fairly teems with dramatic value in character, in situation, and in dialogue. Broad, deft strokes must reveal character and individual personality. The dialogue, in particular, must reveal character and situation by expressing the ideas and emotions at moments of high emotional functioning. It is in these moments that personality and incident are most effectively dramatic. A whole character may

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be revealed in a single sentence or even in a single word; or a bit of stage business may unveil a whole latent personality or emphasize a complete situation. A happy combination of dramatic dialogue and significant stage business in an effective stage setting, is most desirable in an opening. This combination is seen to good advantage in Sir James M. Barrie's "The Twelve Pound Look," Alice Gerstenberg's "Overtones," and Lord Dunsany's "The Glittering Gate." An examination thereof will show that their dramatic strength lies in their power of revealing a great deal more than is directly presented.

In the Beginning, then, the dramatist must keep in mind that in the One-act play there is no room for the old-fashioned, leisurely expository conversation between courtier and menial, between butler and parlor-maid, or between the hero and his confidant or between the heroine and her confidante. No reporter can have a long interview with the man of the house or the head of a business firm; nor can one person relate the story of his life to another. These methods are antiquated even in the longer dramatic form, and are wholly foreign to the rapid beginning of the One-act play. Moreover, the opening of a One-act play has no room for lively and sparkling dialogue for its own sake; it has no place for unnecessary characters or for unes-

sential elements of plot, neither of which appear as forces in the subsequent development. It must be remembered that the plot of the One-act form is structurally simplified and that the elements which enter into the Beginning of the plot are correspondingly few and simple but none the less essential and fundamentally dramatic.

From the point of view of constructive art, the Beginning is ever a happy medium between extremes. It is not too colorless, nor too ambitious. It is not too long, nor too short. It presents neither too much nor too little. It forestalls but does not foretell—anticipation will kill the whole play. It gives rise to expectations, but the play always fulfils them—there must be no blind alleys. It must be rapid and dramatic, but not precipitous and merely striking. The cult of the dramatic punch has been too much overdone. It reveals and emphasizes without directly stating or without being obvious. It is a most highly effective bit of dramatic composition; but tricks, pure mechanics, and the glamour of the artificial are not the means by which the artistic effect is secured.

## WHERE AND HOW TO BEGIN

The question of *where* to begin the play is one of no little importance; fortunately, while a fixed rule is scarcely ever in good point in

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discussing an art having so many aspects as play-making, some valuable suggestions can be given to the one who essays dramatic composition for the first time. The playwright must keep in mind that in the One-act play there is no hiatus in time as there often is in a short-story or a novel; that the curtain once up, there is a continuous dramatic progression to the close,—there are no act or scene divisions as in the longer play; and that the One-act play gives a compact unity of effect the like of which the longer play, cut up into three or four divisions, cannot always give. Psychologists emphasize the fact that a unity of effect is best secured when the effect is presented in close connection with the cause; the mind responds best when the two are in relative conjunction. One of the most fundamental precepts, therefore, is that it is well to begin the play as near as possible to the point of highest interest,—keeping in mind, however, that one is obliged to provide a sufficient number of antecedent situations so that they will adequately prepare the mind most receptively for the crucial moment.

It was pointed out in the chapter on plot that if there are too few situations the crucial moment will come as a shock because the audience has not been properly prepared for it; and that if there are too many, there will be little else than confusion and lack of interest. In

fact, the technique of the One-act form demands that one shall start one's play as late as possible in the procession of events and shall assume the necessary antecedent incidents in passages of backward-looking exposition. The dramatist should catch his story at its significant moment and then construct the antecedent situations in the light of psychology and the technical requirements of the One-act play.

In the next place, it must be kept in mind that the writer of a play does not deal with a protracted series of events as does the novelist; he deals with a series of short, sharp crises. Likewise it must be remembered that in real life there are no actual beginnings; accordingly, the playwright must construct a Beginning. He must begin at a place in his story where he can accumulate forces and incidents strong enough to give rise to an inherently dramatic situation out of which there will evolve dramatic action that will move forward to a final outcome. The curtain should be raised, then, at that point where character and incident begin to assume significant relations with such force and rapidity as will indicate subsequent vital movement.

The plot of every One-act play is the condensed essence of a story whose length is usually much longer than the plot and invariably much more loose-jointed. A plot is constructed out of a general succession of events, some real and

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some invented. Out of this succession of events, the dramatist constructs sharp crises and a crucial moment. This succession of events is structurally somewhat similar to a passing procession on a gala day. If one looks at the passing throng in the thoroughfare, he sees a certain part of it at any particular moment and, no doubt, remembers much of what has gone before and may, half vividly, imagine what is to come. If a person wished to take a photograph, and were permitted to take but one, he should want to seek out that very brief period of the total movement which was at the same time most vital in itself, most reminiscent of all that had gone before, and most suggestive of all that is to follow. As a matter of fact, the artist halts the procession at the moment when the whole is most vital and significant, and makes a work of art of it. The writer of the One-act play will so condense and so handle his material that both the Beginning and the End will most effectively bring out and emphasize the significance of the crucial moment. This is the artistic and technical demand of the One-act form.

The manner in which it is most advantageous to open a play is best determined from direct observation of a theatre audience and from the practices of the most approved playwrights of the day. In the opening of any play that is staged, whether One-act or three-act, there are

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two fundamental considerations at the outset: one is that when the curtain goes up there is immediately present the matter of focussing the attention and seizing the interest of the audience to the play on the stage; and the second is that there is always, in an assembled group, the attendant initial confusion of bits of hastily ended conversations and of the entrance of late-comers. Under these circumstances, and every one knows that they are general even in these days, very few persons in the play-house really hear the first few lines of dialogue of any play. In a three-act play, one may begin by using unessential dialogue or by presenting a more or less inconsequential scene while the audience is settling to the matter before them. In a One-act play, on the other hand, which has but a few minutes to give to the Beginning and which cannot open in a leisurely way, the first lines are usually very important; and, if these are not likely to be heard, it is well that the play do not begin with dialogue. Psychological observation offers a solution: although the majority of the assembled group may not be able to hear what is said at the outset of the play on the stage, *all can see what is done*. And a thorough examination of the leading One-act plays of the day reveals that a very large percentage of them open with significant stage business and dramatic panto-



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mime. Seeing is believing, in the theatre. Interpretative and connotative stage business and pantomime which catch the eye, at once arouse attention and fix it upon the stage; as a result, when the first dialogue is spoken, the audience gets its full import. The student will spend an hour to good end, if he will examine the openings of such plays as Thomas H. Dickinson's "In Hospital," Lord Dunsany's "The Glittering Gate," George Bernard Shaw's "Press Cuttings," William Ellery Leonard's "Glory of the Morning," George Middleton's "Criminals," "Embers," "The Gargoyle," "The Cheat of Pity," Percival Wilde's "The Noble Lord," Alfred Sutro's "Carrots," Richard Harding Davis's "Blackmail" and "Miss Civilization." Each is a happy example of an effective Beginning. Sir James M. Barrie's "Pantaloons" and "The Twelve Pound Look" are admirable examples of effective openings. The stage-business and pantomime which take place in the "Twelve Pound Look" before a word of dialogue is spoken are an apt illustration of what a master dramatist can do with the Beginning in the One-act form,—

*Harry* is to receive the honor of knighthood in a few days, and we discover him in the sumptuous 'snuggery' of his home in Kensington (or is it Westminster?), rehearsing the ceremony with his wife. They have been at it all

the morning, a pleasing occupation. *Mrs. Sims* (as we may call her for the last time, as it were, and strictly as a good-natured joke) is wearing her presentation gown, and personates the august one who is about to dub her *Harry* knight. She is seated regally. Her jewelled shoulders proclaim aloud her husband's generosity. She must be an extraordinarily proud and happy woman, yet she has a drawn face and shrinking ways as if there were some one near her of whom she is afraid. She claps her hands, as the signal to *Harry*. He enters bowing and with a graceful swerve of the leg. He is only partly in costume, the sword and the real stockings not having arrived yet. With a gliding motion that is only delayed while one leg makes up on the other, he reaches his wife, and, going on one knee, raises her hand superbly to his lips. She taps him on the shoulder with a paper-knife and says huskily, 'Rise, Sir Harry.' He rises, bows, and glides about the room, going on his knees to various articles of furniture, and rises from each a knight. It is a radiant domestic scene, and *Harry* is as dignified as if he knew that royalty was rehearsing it at the other end.

*Sir Harry* (complacently): Did that seem all right, eh?

*Lady Sims* (much relieved): I think perfect.

*Sir Harry*: But was it dignified?

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*Lady Sims:* Oh, very. And it will be still more so when you have the sword.

*Sir Harry:* The sword will lend it an air. These are really the five movements—(Suiting the action to the word)—the glide—the dip—the kiss—the tap—and you back out a knight. It's short, but it's a very beautiful ceremony. (Kindly) Anything you can suggest?

*Lady Sims:* No—oh no. (Nervously, seeing him pause to kiss the tassel of a cushion) You don't think you have practised till you know what to do almost too well?

(He has been in blissful temper, but such niggling criticism would try any man)

*Sir Harry:* I do not. Don't talk nonsense. Wait till your opinion is asked for.

## CHAPTER VII

### THE MIDDLE OF THE ONE-ACT PLAY

#### THE CRUCIAL MOMENT

ONCE the Beginning of the One-act play is constructed, the next structural problem to be dealt with is that involved in the crucial moment and the series of minor crises which lead up to it,—the Middle. If the play has started well, the essential forces, of whatever nature, have been visualized in more or less concrete action. The audience has been made aware of a dramatic situation, of active and causal relations between character and incident, and is at once somewhat concerned with subsequent dramatic action and with the ultimate outcome. The assembled group is aware of certain causes which have been presented to it, and now it looks forward to the effect. Structurally, the Middle of a One-act play has for its concern a crucial and significant moment and the series of minor crises which lead up to it.

The playwright must not fail to conceive the Middle of his play as a structural and organic unit; it is a dramatic problem no less important

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and no less difficult than that involved in the Beginning or in the End. While the Middle, of need, has a distinctive organic relation to the Beginning and to the End, it is, nevertheless, something of a problem in and of itself. Its chief interest is crisis; its end and aim is crucial situation. "A great play," says William Archer, "consists or ought to consist of a great crisis worked out through a series of minor crises." It is for the one big and vital moment that the Middle exists. Its function is to present this crowning effect in such a way as to justify all that has preceded in the play and to emphasize most strongly and effectively the crucial significance of the play as a whole. The playwright is obliged to conceive this as a dramatic problem in climax,—a series of significant moments leading to an ultimate outcome.

The crucial moment of the One-act play is the focus, the capstone, the converging point of all the dramatic forces of the plot. It is here that the playwright has his largest opportunity to exemplify the theme of his play and to provoke in his audience the emotional functioning and the response he desires. It is the apex. It is at this point that all forces, all elements of character, all the dramatic values of situation, are coöperative to a determining end. It is the central dynamic scene, illustrating and

illuminating all that has gone before and all that is to follow. Without it there is no play; it is for this one thing that the drama exists. Whatever motive forces there are in the characters, whatever dynamic values there are in incident and in circumstance, whatever cumulative dramatic action accrues from the inter-play of character and incident through a series of minor crises,—these all play their trump cards at the one final, crucial moment.

The playwright, in dealing with his plot, must recognize and must *feel* that this vital point comprises the one dominant emotional impression, or the sum-total of emotional effect of a series of lesser impressions each one somewhat individual in itself, yet all integrated into a larger and more moving homogeneous unity. It is that supreme place in the action where the emotional values are most deep, most stirring, and where they affect the observer more strongly than at any other point. It is strongly noticeable that an audience functions very deeply at the crucial moment in such plays as Mary Aldis's "Extreme Unction," Fenn and Price's "Op-o'-Me-Thumb," William Butler Yeats's "Cathleen ni Hoolihan," George Middleton's "Criminals," Lewis Beach's "The Clod"; and that one's sense of humor is strikingly provoked at the crucial moments in such plays as Alice Gerstenberg's "Overtones," Lady Gregory's

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"The Workhouse Ward," Paul Hervieu's "Modesty," and Arthur Schnitzler's "A Farewell Supper" and "The Wedding Morning," and George Cram Cook and Susan Glaspell's "Suppressed Desires." These moments are most dramatic and most provocative of emotional response because they represent the culmination of suspense, of interest, and of all the emotional values that have preceded. These are the moments in these plays when one is most impelled to weep or to laugh, as the case may be. Such points in a play usually have the largest amount of dramatic intensity,—the place where the emotions are most highly wrought up and where one is impelled to think, to feel, or to want to do or to be. With electrifying brilliancy they illustrate and emphasize the highest emotional values of plot.

The crucial moment of a One-act play is the *obligatory* scene; or, as Sarcey terms it, the *scene à faire*. It is that moment toward which everything has pointed; it is the scene which the dramatist *must* present else there is no justification for the existence of his play. It is the end, the finale, the consummate result which the assembled group has been led to look forward to. Accordingly, the playwright, having aroused the expectations of his audience, is obliged to satisfy them by presenting a result, a final and satisfying crucial moment. He must

present in action, and not by narration, that point where the struggle or inter-play of forces can grow no more tense, where there can be no further complication and where something vital must happen even in the very cutting of the knot.

This apex of the dramatic movement is, therefore, frequently coincident with some significant and definite change in relations between characters or between characters and incident. In the crucial moment, sometimes personality is most strikingly revealed and sometimes the situation is most highly emphasized. The moment the crucial point is reached an entirely new situation has come to be; the characters are no longer in the same relation to each other, nor are the incidents and circumstances, amid which they have further relations, the same. The inter-play of character on character and of character on incident and of incident on character, is forthwith from a new point of view. This significant change in relations between characters and the emphasis on personality or on situation, as the case may be, is well illustrated in such One-act plays as August Strindberg's "Countess Julie" and "Facing Death," Alfred Sutro's "The Correct Thing" and "The Bracelet," Lord Dunsany's "The Lost Silk Hat," Sir James M. Barrie's "The Twelve Pound Look" and "Der Tag," J. Hart-



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ley Manners' "Happiness" and "The Day of Dupes," and Edgar Allan Woolf's satirical social comedy, "The Lollard." If the playwright use this method of bringing all his plot forces to an apex, he must see to it that the change in relations between the characters is clear-cut and conclusive.

On the other hand, the observing dramatist soon learns that not all dramatic plots end in this way. In not a few One-act plays, a situation already existing throughout the dramatic movement, is but reëmphasized more strongly and more effectively at the close. Alice Gerstenberg's "Overtones" is a case in point, as is also Lady Gregory's "The Workhouse Ward." Analysis of this type of play will reveal that, in conventional terms of dramaturgy, one dramatic force does not triumph over the other. Instead, the same situation and the same relation between the two plot factors obtains throughout the play, and, at the end, is the more effective and emphatic because of the stronger tension at that point.

Whatever aspect the crucial moment assume, it should be an event more or less remarkable in some respect. It may be a significant effect which is the result of antecedent causes, as in Lewis Beach's "The Clod," or in August Strindberg's "Facing Death." It may be a moment in which personality and character must strik-

ingly reveal themselves, as in Alfred Sutro's "The Correct Thing," and in Paul Hervieu's "Modesty"; or it may be a moment of very strong emotional functioning as in George Middleton's "The Cheat of Pity," and in Fenn and Price's "'Op-o'-Me-Thumb." On the other hand, it may be an unusual situation, as in Richard Harding Davis's "Blackmail," in Anton Tchekov's "A Marriage Proposal," in Philip Moeller's "Helena's Husband" and in Margaret Cameron's "The Burglar." Again it may be a moment of deep and tragic recognition, as in Sir James M. Barrie's "Der Tag," August Strindberg's "Countess Julie," George Middleton's "Criminals" and the melodramatic "The Finger of God" of Pervival Wilde.

It cannot be too strongly impressed upon the playwright, that the handling of the crucial moment is a very important dramatic problem. The crucial moment must be pointed out and revealed; the audience demands that they *see* it—it must not take place off stage nor must it be narrated. It must take place on the stage in concrete objective action accompanied by more than ordinary emotional functioning. As a result, the crucial moment of a One-act play is most often represented by significant and meaningful stage business and by a minimum of dialogue. Sometimes only a short sentence or two is necessary, and not infrequently a word or two

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suffices. In George Middleton's "The Cheat of Pity" the crucial moment comes when *Mrs. Houston* realizes that her husband has just died upstairs and that her lover no longer cares for her because she permitted her pity for her husband to set aside her affection for *Craig Gordon*, the man whom she loved. The whole is revealed in her words, "Dead! both dead!" which she utters in tragic and heart-breaking tones. In the melodramatic and spectacular "Blackmail" of Richard Harding Davis, the crucial moment comes when, after *Fallon* has deliberately shot *Mohun, Kelly*, the Pinkerton detective, in answer to a question over the telephone from the hotel office, says, with the tone of insistent finality, "Of course in self-defence, you fool, *of course*, in self-defence!" A single sentence is all that is necessary. More than this would spoil the whole effect. In August Strindberg's "Facing Death" the final situation comes when *Adele* realizes that her father, in order to relieve his further suffering from his vampire-like daughters, has set fire to the house and is burning himself up, and that, to escape the physical pain of being burned he has taken poison.

*Adele*: It's burning, it's burning! Father, what's the matter with you. You'll burn up.

(Durand lifts his head, takes the water glass

up and puts it down with a meaningful gesture)  
You have—taken—poison!

*Durand* (Nods affirmatively).

Here is a happy combination of a few bits of dialogue and of accompanying stage business; and the stage business reveals and expresses in concrete objective action what dialogue could not possibly express. Again, in Lord Dunsany's "The Glittering Gate," the end of the dramatic movement comes when *Bill*, who with *Jim* has been trying to open the large glittering gates of heaven and who is anxious to see what it would be like, succeeds in throwing aside the ponderous portal—

*Bill* (Staggering and gazing into the revealed Nothing, in which far stars go wandering)  
Stars, blooming great stars. There ain't no heaven, Jim.

Whatever the nature of the crucial moment—change in relations between characters, emphasis of a situation obtaining throughout the play, revelation of personality, a striking situation, or what not—it should give a feeling of finality and satisfaction. The supreme moment in such plays as Marion Craig Wentworth's "War Brides," William Ellery Leonard's "Glory of the Morning," William Butler Yeats's "The Hour-Glass," August Strindberg's "Countess Julie," and Paul Hervieu's "Modesty" are final and conclusive. The dramatic

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movements come to a complete end; thereafter a new situation obtains. The more a final crisis can bring all plot elements to a complete focus the better the play. The apex of the plot movement of a One-act play should be conclusive and satisfying—satisfying, not because it pleases the audience, for in some cases it does not do this, but because it is a logical and plausible outcome.

### THE PROGRESSIVE INTER-PLAY OF DRAMATIC FORCES

In the One-act play, as in all other kinds of fiction, the crucial moment is the result of previous causes or forces. Something has come to be because something else has taken place. A significant moment obtains because there has been inter-play of character and incident. Forces and dramatic elements of one kind or another have been operative to a given result.

It would seem that much misunderstanding has arisen—and indeed not a little harm has been done—because of what has seemed, in some quarters, to be over-insistence on the precept that plot depends on conflict, struggle, and contention,—the push and pull of opposing influences that threaten to change the state of things as in the exposition they have been shown to be. When Brunetière says that, “The

theatre in general is nothing but the place for the development of the human will, attacking the obstacles opposed to it by destiny, fortune, or circumstance," one gets the feeling that he was speaking largely from the point of view of French tragedy, and that, unwittingly, he over-emphasized the application thereof to drama in the by and large. And when he asserts that, "In drama or farce, what we ask of the theatre is the spectacle of a *will* striving toward a goal, and conscious of the means which it employs," he has again over-emphasized the volitional initiative of character in drama. Again, in his statement, "Drama is a representation of the will of man in conflict with the mysterious powers or natural forces which limit and belittle us; it is one of us thrown living upon the stage, there to struggle against fatality, against social law, against one of his fellow-mortals, against himself, if need be, against the ambitions, the interests, the prejudices, the folly, the malevolence of those who surround him," he once more emphasizes the volitional initiative of character at the expense of another equally important element—dramatic incident.

The writer of a play must keep in mind that his plot is the result of the inter-play of character and incident, which gives rise to a series of crises and situations. The more potential the dramatic elements in character and the

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more vital the incidents, the more dynamic is the plot-action. It is for this reason that Sir James M. Barrie's "The Twelve Pound Look" has far more drama in it than such a play as Richard Harding Davis's "Miss Civilization"; and it is for this same reason that George Cram Cook and Susan Glaspell's "Suppressed Desires" is a more significant comedy than Philip Moeller's "Helena's Husband." Often, indeed, this dynamic inter-play of forces does give rise to genuine volitional struggle, to wilful contention, and to out and out strife. August Strindberg's "Countess Julie," Alfred Sutro's "The Correct Thing," and Lewis Beach's "The Clod" have very strong elements of struggle and contention. On the other hand, Zona Gale's "Neighbors," Alice Gerstenberg's "Overtones," J. Hartley Manners' "Happiness," and Lord Dunsany's "The Glittering Gate," are not characterized by so specific a struggle, contest, and contention. It must be understood, however, that in a drama the inter-play of character and incident giving rise to crisis and situation must be vital enough to provoke emotional response in the spectator; but to advocate that this inter-play must be in the nature of struggle, conflict, and violent contention is pushing the point too far. The gist of the whole matter is that a good One-act play has as its very essence inter-play of forces sufficiently dynamic to arouse

interest, to provoke suspense, and to stimulate emotional response thereto. The stronger the power to provoke this response, the more dramatic the play. Not all plays, however, are founded on one of the passionate cruces of life, when duty and inclination come to the grapple.

Although many plays are not characterized by a specific struggle the dramatist must remember that the experiences of human activity show that life is characterized by such an interplay of forces as often does assume the nature of struggle and violent grapple with obstacles. The Anglo-Saxon mind has such experiences as one of its strongest inheritances; accordingly it is eager to see such a struggle, and often the more tragic it is the more it pleases. The best evidence that this is the interest of human life is the material of the daily press. "Were you to ask me," says Chester S. Lord of the *New York Sun* before a group of teachers of journalism, "to name the kind of news for which the people surge and struggle, I surely must reply that it is the details of a contest—a fight whether between men, or dogs, or armies." Archibald Henderson, in the *Forum* for August, 1914, was quite in point when he said, "A play appeals as does a fight—a prize-fight, bull-fight, cock-fight, etc.,—struggle naturally being the thing best adapted to emotional excitation." Human nature, it may be observed,



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loves a fight, whether it be with clubs or with swords, with tongues or with brains. The danger that the amateur must guard against is that he should not go too far in giving to his characters so strong volitional initiative or in creating obstacles and opposing forces, as to give rise to artificial contention and theatrical trick.

The inter-play of forces in a dramatic action may assume a large variety of aspects; the number is almost legion. In August Strindberg's "Facing Death," it is the struggle of a father against the ill treatment of his three vampire-like daughters and their mother before them. In George Middleton's "The Cheat of Pity," a very effective play on the stage, the two forces operative are a woman's pity for one man and her love for another. In Alice Gerstenberg's "Overtones," the dramatic inter-play of forces lies in a contrast between two women who are very decorous and flattering toward each other, but whose real natures, in the guise of supposedly invisible attendants, are bitter and critical, indeed very uncomplimentary, when removed from social restraint. In Lady Gregory's "The Workhouse Ward," the quarrelsome dispositions of two invalid Irishmen give rise to highly amusing situations; and in William Butler Yeats's "Cathleen ni Hoolihan," the two dramatic elements giving rise to movement are a youth's love for his sweetheart whom

he is about to marry, and his love for Ireland.

A critical analysis of One-act plays reveals the interesting fact that many of them are in the nature of a quarrel or at least have strong quarrel scenes in them. Alfred Sutro's "The Bracelet," "The Correct Thing" and "Ella's Apology," Anton Tchekov's "The Boor" and "A Marriage Proposal," August Strindberg's "The Stronger," "Pariah" and "The Outlaw," Sir James M. Barrie's "The Twelve Pound Look" and "Der Tag," George Middleton's "Criminals," "On Bail," "The Wife" and "Tradition," Paul Hervieu's "Modesty," Alice Gerstenberg's "Overtones," G. Bernard Shaw's "Press Cuttings," Alice Brown's "Joint Owners in Spain"—each has in it an element of quarrel. Because of this element each one of these plays has a strong inter-play of forces, which gives rise to increasingly interesting situations. A playwright will almost surely get a hearing for a play that is, in its essentials, a quarrel scene.

Whatever be the nature of the inter-play of forces and the dramatic action, it must advance. The action must not merely progress; it must be cumulative and must advance with rising and increasing interest. Not only *onward* but also *upward* is the movement of a dynamic action in a play. This can obtain only when each succeeding crisis and situation grows out of the one immediately before it. Progress can be

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present only when there arise constantly new things, new relations, new incidents, all of which make the growing complication more vital and crucial. The action must be cumulative; each subsequent situation and crisis must be more vital and more dynamic than the previous one else there is no advance to a crucial moment.

### THE NATURE OF DRAMATIC ACTION

Action, says Aristotle, is the soul of drama; and Hegel, Brunetière, and almost every other critic of any note have reëmphasized this same idea. Clever dialogue, however racy, witty, or poignant, will, in itself, never make drama. On the other hand, emotional scenes, in themselves, do not make drama; a dramatic scene must have crisis and situation in it; must be significant and must lead somewhere. Action is not spectacle, display, or theatrical trick. Action is not extraneous gesture, stage business, or stage direction; action is not a running about the stage, not a wild throwing of the arms accompanied by utterances full of sound and fury signifying nothing. These arouse and electrify, but for the moment only; they are mere excitement. Real dramatic action, however, is that which moves one emotionally and that which makes a more or less lasting and vital impression upon the spectator.

Dramatic action, if it is the *soul* of drama as Aristotle has asserted, is that progressive and vital movement of a play, that gives the play being and makes it what it is. Dramatic action is the perceivable inter-play of character, incident, circumstance, and such plausible accidents of life as may befall human beings or may suddenly come into the natural course of events. The careful analysis of any One-act play will reveal that its *soul* or its action is the progressive movement, the inter-play of all the forces which enter into its make-up,—personality of character, dynamic nature of incident and circumstance, plausible accident, all of which, because of their very nature, give rise to a series of situations and crises. Dramatic action means the dynamic and progressive movement of an inter-play of forces through a series of situations and crises to a final outcome.

If the playwright is to get this action, this progressive inter-play of forces, to his audience, he must present it through concrete and objective scenes of more or less highly emotional nature. Strong emotion, psychologists are agreed, is naturally expressed and revealed in outward physical manifestations of one kind or another. Accordingly, that dramatic action is most effective whose emotional values appear in concrete and objective form. Physical, psychological, and emotional action should co-exist in

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the series of crises in the play. To reveal personality, emotion, and dramatic action through concrete demeanor of characters is the task of the playwright. He must visualize for his audience, in terms of suggestive and connotative action, the emotional functioning of his *dramatis personæ*; their struggles and personalities must be *seen* and not related. Drama appeals to the eye and not to the ear. The writer who can show the cruces of life, and who can carry emotional values across the foot-lights to the assembled group, through interpretative and significant concrete action, has advanced far in the practical aspect of dramaturgy.

The playwright should also keep in mind that not only is dramatic action most often expressed in terms of the objective, but it is also identified with the more vital aspects of incident and character. The most telling dramatic action is that which takes place within the hearts and souls of men and women. It is coincident with those moments when the human soul is being put to the test. Action is dramatic only when it means something and when it leads somewhere. A man whose life is at stake at the point of a pistol is by no means so dramatic a figure as he would be if his personality and his very soul's being are at stake at the point of some one else's ideas, personality, or course of action. That which makes the action of Alfred Sutro's "The

Correct Thing" so moving and dramatic is that the very soul's longing of *Kitty Bellamy* is at stake because of the personality and conduct of her erstwhile lover, *D'Arcy Galbraith*. In August Strindberg's "Countess Julie," not only the personality but even the life of *Julie* is at stake because she has fallen a victim to a stronger personality—that of her seducer, *Jean*.

Indeed, the dramatist should keep in mind that dramatic action does not obtain until the representation or the inter-play of forces assumes a vital and significant aspect. In the Beginning of a play the *status quo*, the initial existing state of things and the initial situation, has been presented. The very moment this existing state of affairs is threatened with significant change, there is action—the movement or development of the plot begins. Something has happened or has been done that threatens to produce, or actually does produce, change; matters are not as they were; a new condition or influence has thrust itself in, and this new element must either be got rid of, or else it must be accepted as the stronger. From this moment there is an inter-play of forces, either tragic or comic, of more than ordinary significance. Neither character nor incident are identical with what they were before; they find themselves in a different relation one to the

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other. Their personalities react upon each other with telling force: something is at stake, the inter-play of forces is vital and the dramatic movement is under way. The latent possibilities in character and incident must function sufficiently strong to be vital and significant, before action, in the real dramatic sense, may be said to obtain.

Strong emotional functioning expressed and revealed in terms of objective conduct is ever the law of drama. What the audience responds to is not words, but human character and emotion seen in terms of action and situation. Actionless and emotionless drama is a contradiction in terms; a play of that kind always fails, or at least is a negligible non-dramatic success. The human mind is inherently fond of observing a picture of human life in which personality reveals itself or in which personality is at stake. Personality, emotion, action,—these are the elements of dramatic crisis. And crisis is what the playwright must ever seek for. He will do well to take seriously to heart that—

“If you desire to write a play,  
Then here's the vital notion:  
Each act and scene should well display  
Both *motion* and *emotion*.”

THE MINOR RHYTHMICAL MOVEMENTS AND  
"POINTS"

The structural problem involved in constructing the Middle of a One-act play is that of climax. One may easily slide down a ladder, but it must be ascended step by step. In climbing a mountain, the procedure is usually that of advancing over incline after incline; there is seldom, if ever, a smooth and uniform movement to the top. Only by going over a series of ever increasing difficult and more precipitous inclines is the summit reached and the whole vista beyond revealed. The playwright should be cognizant of the fact that a dramatic gradation to the crucial moment is largely a structural matter and one of no small consequence. He must understand it as a complex study in climactic arrangement.

One of the very first things that a playwright learns in working out a plot or a dramatic action is that, because of the very nature of inter-play of dynamic forces, there is a tendency for the whole dramatic movement to resolve itself into a number of minor dramatic movements. Seldom are these of equal length, nor are they in the same emotional plane. Crises are the end and aim of drama; hence each succeeding minor movement is usually more dra-



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matic and correspondingly shorter. The general movement of the whole is staccato rather than legato. As a matter of good dramaturgy, it is highly desirable that the general progressive movement be not mechanically gradual and regular,—the idealized conceptions of some critics to the contrary notwithstanding. The very irregularity and uncertainty of the movement, though it should always have an upward and climactic tendency, is one of the greatest sources of interest and suspense in dramatic action. In any case, the progressive action of any One-act play tends to resolve itself into a series of minor movements.

An analysis of Sir James M. Barrie's very tragic "*Der Tag*," a play by no means technically perfect, will show that it falls into two minor dramatic movements. The first includes the movement up to the dream of the *Emperor*, and the second includes the drama proper, with the awakening at the close. Further analysis will show that the first movement is composed of two lesser movements: (1) The meeting between *An Officer*, *The Chancellor*, and *An Emperor*, in which the *Emperor* is urged to sign a declaration of war, and (2) the soliloquy of the *Emperor* after the *Officer* and the *Chancellor* have left at the *Emperor's* request. The second main movement is composed of three lesser movements: (1) The *Spirit of*

*Culture* pleads with the *Emperor* not to sign, (2) the entrance of the *Officer* and the *Chancellor* both of whom are dismissed by the *Emperor* who has decided that there shall be no war, and (3) the second appearance of the *Spirit of Culture* to the *Emperor*, who really had declared war although he had dreamed that he had not done so, whose recognition of the havoc war has brought among the nations is a tragic crucial moment. An examination of the structure of Lord Dunsany's "The Lost Silk Hat" will reveal that that delightful comedy resolves itself into two minor movements: (1) That in which the *Caller* wishes some one to get his hat, and (2) that in which he is impelled to get it himself. Furthermore, the whole play divides itself into four rather distinct divisions: (1) The *Caller* wishes a *Laborer* to get the hat; (2) the *Caller* wishes a *Clerk* to get it; (3) The *Caller* wishes the *Poet* to get it and (4) the resolving movement of the *Poet* and the *Police-man*. Further study of this play will reveal that these minor movements are not of equal length but that they tend to grow in dramatic value and in rapidity of progress as the play grows to an end. Additional examination of other One-act plays will show that they all tend to fall into a series of minor rhythmical movements.

It is hardly too much to say that if the

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dramatist does not consciously *feel* and recognize this rhythmical movement in the inter-play of the forces in his plot, he has not yet arrived at a point in his construction where his plan is really a dramatic unit. Until he does feel this rhythmical movement, this series of crises—for drama is made up of a series of crises—his plot has not ripened and is not yet ready for use.

Structurally, each one of these minor movements is a dramatic problem in itself; each minor movement, growing as it does out of previous conditions and leading to a subsequent one, has something of the structural aspect characteristic of the whole play. If an examination is made of the structural design of the series of movements in Sir James M. Barrie's "Der Tag" and Lord Dunsany's "The Lost Silk Hat"—and for that matter any One-act play—it will appear that each one of the movements is something of a further study in climax.

As a matter of fact, the second important thing that a playwright learns, as he grows in constructive ability and as he familiarizes himself more and more with the dramatic methods and structure employed by others in the working out of a plot, is that each one of the minor movements of a plot is usually made up of a series of more or less individual "points" (the word "point" is used here because the words

“episode,” “incident,” or “situation,” are too comprehensive and too inclusive) whose individuality does not often appear, however, except when the movement is critically analyzed. Just as the whole play is made up of the series of minor crises and movements so is each one of these movements made up of a series of “points.” It is a structural problem in the details of a dramatic movement.

If an analysis is made of the first movement in Sir James M. Barrie’s “Der Tag” it will appear that after the premises of the Beginning, in which it is made clear that *An Officer* and *The Chancellor* wish *An Emperor* to sign a declaration of war against France and Russia, there is a series of twelve points: (1) The *Emperor* is not *afraid* to sign! The *Emperor* has made the Fatherland what it is, (2) Enemies must not be dealt with together but separately, (3) The Day has come—if Britain wants war she may have it now, (4) No road to Britain until the neighbors are subdued, (5) Britain will not join now—she is too busy with her own internal affairs, (6) Britain has grown sluggish—her part in the World’s making is done, (7) *Chancellor* has attempted a secret treaty with Britain against France, (8) *Emperor* can fling a million men within a week across the border into France, (9) *Officer* urges the *Emperor* to go through Belgium—but the *Emperor* will

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keep his word of honor, (10) *Chancellor* suggests that he has private ground for thinking that France would hack her way through Belgium, (11) "Bonaparte would have acted quickly," (12) *Emperor* asks the *Officer* and the *Chancellor* to leave and return in an hour when he will have signed it. If the second movement (that of the *Emperor's* soliloquy) is analyzed, it will appear that this is made up of five "points": (1) Every king's life has its day of opportunity—and this is the *Emperor's*, (2) Plans for the capture of Paris, sweeping the English Channel and capture of London, British fleet destroyed, and America carved into mouthfuls for colonists, (3) "Dictator of the world!", (4) "God in the heavens, I upon the earth, we two!", (5) "—the Zeppelins! I'll sign!"

In the next movement, in which the *Spirit of Culture* appears to the *Emperor* in a dream, the *Emperor* gives his reasons for declaring war: (1) Germany wishes to spread farther the banner of *Culture*, (2) The nations are jealous, (3) It is Germany's divine mission to expand, and (4)—

*Emperor*: France invades little Belgium.

*Culture*: Chivalrous France! Never! *Emperor*, I leave one last word to you at the parting of the ways. France, Russia, Britain, these are great opponents, but it is not they will

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bring the pillars of Germany down. Beware of Belgium!

In the following movement, a short but very dramatic one, the *Emperor* commands to the *Officer* and the *Chancellor* that "there will be no war." "That be my Zenith!"

The last movement leading up to the crucial moment is a happy illustration of how a dramatic strophe is made up of a series of "points,"—in this case nine of them.

(He goes back to the chair; he sleeps peacefully; in the distance a bell tolls the Angelus; and suddenly this is broken by one boom of a great gun, which reverberates and should be startling. *The Spirit of Culture* returns, now with a wound in her breast; she surveys him sadly.)

*Culture*: Sleep on, unhappy King. (He grows restless.) Better to wake if even your dreams appal you.

(He wakes and for a moment he scarcely understands that he has been dreaming; the realization is tragic to him.)

*Emperor*: You! You have come here to mock me!

*Culture*: Oh, no.

*Emperor*: I dreamed there was no war. In my dream they came to me and I forbade the war. I saw the Fatherland smiling and prosperous, as it was before the war.

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*Culture:* It was you who made the war, O Emperor!

*Emperor* (huskily): Belgium.

*Culture:* There is no Belgium now, but over what was Belgium there rests a soft light, as of a helm, and through it is a flaming sword.

*Emperor:* I dreamed I had kept my plighted word to Belgium.

*Culture:* It was you, O Emperor, who broke your plighted word and laid waste the land. In the lust for victory you violated even the laws of war which men contrive so that when the sword is sheathed they may dare again face their Maker. Your way to Him is lighted now by smouldering spires and ashes that were once fair academic groves of mine, and you shall seek Him over roads cobbled with the moans of innocents.

*Emperor:* In my dream I thought England was grown degenerate and would not fight.

*Culture:* She fought you where Crécy was, and Agincourt, and Waterloo, with all their dead to help her. The dead became quick in their ancient graves, stirred by the tread of the island feet, and they cried out: "How is England doing?" The living answered the dead upon their bugles with the "All's well." England, O Emperor, was grown degenerate, but you, *you*, have made her great.

*Emperor:* France, Russia?

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*Culture:* They are here around your walls.

*Emperor:* My people?

*Culture:* I see none marching but men whose feet make no sound. Shades of your soldiers who pass on and on, in never-ending lines.

*Emperor:* Do they curse me?

*Culture:* None curses; they all salute you as they pass. They have done your bidding.

*Emperor:* The women curse me?

*Culture:* Not even the women. They, too, salute you. You were their Father and could do no wrong.

*Emperor:* And you?

*Culture:* I have come with this gaping wound in my breast to bid you farewell.

*Emperor:* God cannot let my Germany be utterly destroyed.

*Culture:* If God is with the Allies, Germany will not be destroyed. Farewell. (She is going. She lifts a pistol from the table and puts it in his hand. It is all she can do for her old friend. She goes away with shining eyes. The penny dip burns low. The great *Emperor* is lost in its shadows.)

A third thing that the practising playwright soon learns is that it is in these movements, crises, and "points" that he has his opportunity to reveal character, situation, and emotion in terms of concrete objective action. These are the moments for revealing flashes of



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personality, for expressing some pertinent observation of life. It is here that the emotional functioning is strongest—here is the dramatic momentum. It is in these moments that personality clashes with personality, force with force, motive with motive. Usually a good dramatic story has the material for these crises and “points” already at hand; if the material is not present, the playwright must invent it and must create minor crises for the proper sequence—keeping in mind all the while its relation to the general dramatic movement and to the crucial moment. It is by presenting a climactic series of movements, crises, and “points” that the dramatist *reveals*, rather than tells, his story to the assembled group. It is through this series of concrete pictures that he has his opportunity to reach his audience.

Practical laboratory work in playwriting, as conducted in the University lecture room, has shown that, in plotting and writing a play, the student will make far more progress in mastering the technique of his craft if he will handle the various minor movements and minor crises on separate sheets of paper. If he will use a separate sheet of paper for each succeeding crisis and situation, he will conceive each one as a separate dramatic problem. Indeed a One-act play is a large structural problem composed of a number of organic and inter-related smaller

structural problems. "To make it a complete unity," says Brett Page, "every little scene demands as careful thought as does the entire playlet. A playlet may be suggestively defined as a number of minute-long playlets moving vividly one after the other to make a vivid whole." On the other hand, the dramatist must not forget that while every movement, situation, or crisis is something of a problem in itself, each one must be conceived and worked out from the point of view of its relation to the final outcome, and that whatever mechanics there is in the structural order and design, all evidence of it must be removed by blending the various parts into a smooth and harmonious unit.

#### BLENDING, SUSPENSE, PREPARATION

To the practical dramatist who knows his craft, a play appears both as a unit and as a series of structural and organic parts. And it is only on careful analysis that these individual parts appear to the layman. In no case should this individuality and mechanical aspect of parts appear in the acted form on the stage. To remove any possibility of such effect, the skilled playwright so blends the various parts into a whole and finished product that to the assembled group there is no hitch or division, but all appears as a smooth dramatic movement.

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The effective dramatist, by long and arduous work, removes the evidence of the mechanical by ever working and moulding the parts in the light of the ultimate outcome, thereby blending all plot elements into a complete and harmonious unity.

If a play is perfectly plotted, if each situation grows out of its predecessor and also gives rise to its successor, the matter of blending almost takes care of itself. This sort of plotting implies that each crisis and situation has been conceived in its relation to the general dramatic action and in its relation to the crucial moment. From the organic aspect of dramatic movement, it is the function of the playwright to carry the action up to one crisis only to seize it anew and carry it upward to a still higher dramatic moment. To do this means that the writer must construct his climactic series of minor crises in an organic sequence, there must be a blending together of the parts. In a word, there must be no breaks; no movement, no crisis, no "points," should end in a blank wall.

The problem of blending may be considered from a number of structural points of view. Not infrequently this blending may be had largely by following the chronological sequence of crises and situations as they appear in the material of the story. Again, in the more ar-

tificial aspects of plotting, it may be secured by developing from the less emotional point to the most emotional one. Then, too, it may be had by advancing from antecedent causes to subsequent effect. On the other hand, it may be secured by giving to a leading character such volitional initiative that he is able to surmount every obstacle and reach a given end; or it may be brought about by conceiving a series of incidents with which a leading character is brought into contact, with the result that his personality is revealed along a rather prescribed line of development; and, in a third case, one character of one personality may be deftly pitted against a character of another personality, the inter-action between the two giving rise to a series of situations. Not infrequently a dramatist blends by telescoping the end of one crisis or movement with the beginning of the next one. A note of warning is here in point: it is crisis that the writer must seek; accordingly, he should not let his crises or movements telescope too much else a merely commonplace narrative may result. The playwright should see that each situation develops the plot just as far as it can and that it present all the story factors within its limits. If he blends loosely and over-laps the crises too much, there will no dramatic intensity accompany them.

The ideal dramatic structure is that one sit-

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uation shall cue with another; yet, it must be remembered, that ideal dramaturgy always gives way to genuine dramatic values. If each scene or crisis represents an important movement of the action, and if they are managed effectively, and if they are grouped in a series according to some logical plan and to the main effect, the mere fact that some of them are sharply defined one from the other and not very well blended, will produce no sense of division or incoherence when presented on the stage and observed by an audience.

It is not going too far to assert that one of the most effective factors in blending the parts of a dramatic action into a unit is dramatic suspense. "Make 'em laugh; make 'em weep; make 'em *wait*," said Wilkie Collins. To provoke and arouse the interest of an audience because of the problem presented by a situation and then dexterously to make them wait for the solution thereof is to create a condition of suspense. To make one wait when one is eagerly desirous of seeing what is to follow or of seeing what the next situation or problem is to be, is a most effective measure of blending the plot elements for the assembled group. In ever keeping in mind what the present situation may possibly bring forth in the future, the audience thereby associates the one point with the other

and therefore blends the two together. Because suspense is a stirring of present interest coupled with a strong sense that a climactic situation or incident is approaching, the nature of which one strongly wishes to learn, it is, accordingly, a most effective means of blending.

The playwright must not confuse suspense with surprise. Mere surprise is, on the whole, to be avoided in dramatic work. Surprise is that which is wholly accidental, and entirely unlooked for; it happens without any warning or without any apparent cause. There can be no interest in anything that one does not know is going to happen; and since one does not know that it is going to happen, one cannot possibly be interested in its possible outcome—there can be no sense of suspense. Suspense is expectancy mingled with uncertainty: one does not know the exact outcome but is sure that one kind of result or another will ultimately accrue. From this it must not be concluded that surprise is never an element in plot development. On the contrary, plausible accident and surprise often is. John Millington Synge's "The Playboy of the Western World" (a three-act play) makes effective use thereof. The point contended for here is that suspense does not depend upon surprise, nor are they identical.

Suspense obtains only when the audience wonders what the outcome will be and when it

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is eagerly desirous of knowing the result, and when, at the same time, the dramatist stimulates this sense of eagerness by keeping the result from the assembled group but at the same time gives them every hint and encouragement that all will result, at some time or other, in some interesting way. He does not tell all of his plot in advance, nor too much at any one time. Instead, here he reveals a motive, there he lets slip a bit of information, and somewhere else along the line he puts in a sign, a sort of finger-post, which hints at a possible outcome. He foreshadows but does not forestall or foretell. Suspense is a reaching out, a stretching forward of the mind to something often a bit vague but none the less imminent.

A second factor that aids very materially in the matter of blending, is what is conventionally known as preparation. It is one of the obligations of a playwright that he gradually prepare an audience for the crucial situation. A novice in play-building often gives away his whole point or whole effect all at once without any preparation for the shock; whereas this more effective way is to unfold all more or less gradually. His structural problem is to reveal his plot development step by step, not too fast nor too slow; he must reach his height by subtle revelations of motive, of personality,

of probable action, of probable outcome, all of which stand out as marks of progress along the path of dramatic movement.

As one analyzes the progressive action of Lord Dunsany's "The Lost Silk Hat" there is growing evidence that, in all probability, the *Caller* himself will have to go back upstairs and get his hat. In the end, he does go after it; and adequate preparation has been made for the acceptance of just this result. In Richard Harding Davis's "Blackmail" there are some eight or ten times during the movement of the play that it is suggested, hinted, or revealed that *Richard Fallon* intends to kill *Louis Mohun*. Just how he will do it or whether he will succeed is a source of interest and suspense. So carefully has the author of the play provoked dislike for the cruel and inhuman *Mohun* and so deftly has he prepared one for the killing that one unconsciously justifies it when it occurs. In August Strindberg's "The Stronger," a One-act play in which but one character speaks though two are present, it is revealed step by step that *Mme. X*, a married actress, and *Mlle. Y*, an unmarried actress, instead of being friends, are really sullen enemies—*Mlle. Y* is a thorn in the flesh of *Mme. X*, who has married the suitor of *Mlle. Y*. So effective is the preparation that when *Mme. X* bursts forth in hate and anger at the close, one is prepared



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for just such an outcome. It is one of the dicta of good dramaturgy that a playwright should not give the full brunt of his story to the audience in a single shot, but that he should gradually prepare them for an outcome so that when it does appear, even though its exact nature be a bit unlooked for, it will be gladly and readily accepted. Skilful preparation is a distinctive aid to suspense, and, accordingly, a structural factor in blending.

The amateur, and the professional as well, must take care not to make his preparation too obvious. If he does, he anticipates the outcome; he will have given away the point of the story, and then there is no need to tell it. From the point of view of art, also, it is not good taste to let the elbows of the mechanics protrude. The big problem in preparation, and likewise in suspense, lies in knowing just *what* to disclose and *when* to disclose it,—and what not and when not. Only a subtle sense of crisis, of situation, of climactic action, and of dramatic interest and suspense, will make a writer sure of himself in this respect. In any case, the playwright should see to it that his preparation is not too big and too promising with a wholly inadequate result; nor should there be too little and too insignificant preparation for a vital and important result. Preparation is a study in dramatic and structural proportion.

## CHAPTER VIII

### THE END OF THE ONE-ACT PLAY

#### THE STRUCTURE AND NATURE OF THE END

IF the inter-play of dramatic forces, the premises of which were set forth in the Beginning, has been adequately and logically developed through the Middle of the One-act play, the crucial moment thereof has been made clear to the assembled group. The audience knows that, so far as plot-action and movement are concerned, the play has come to a halt; there is no further inter-play of plot forces. From the point of view of a series of crises ending in a vital moment the play is complete; but from the point of view of structure, of psychology, and of art, the play is not complete. It is not yet rounded out into a consistent and artistic unit. If the dramatist wishes his play to be a finished work of art, he has yet to consider the problem of the End.

The dictum that a One-act play shall have an End is not an arbitrary one, it is not an invention of pedantic critics; in fact, it is but the result of deference to the psychological work-

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ing and longing of the human mind and heart. If, in a vital contest of any kind, one person is defeated by another, every one is eager to see how he *takes* his defeat. If, in the struggle of life, one man emerges victorious, the public likes to observe him in the new rôle of victor. Indeed, the public, not infrequently, is more interested in him in his new relations than it is in the crucial test out of which he comes forth triumphant. If some person of note and prominence is proved to be a thief or a malefactor, interest does not lie so much in the proving as in the demeanor of the culprit *after* the proof has been made clear. If a man, who has played the game of life unfairly, loses in a crucial test, one likes to see his reaction subsequent to his defeat. If the love and affection of a good woman has been trifled with and held too lightly by her lover, as in Alfred Sutro's "The Correct Thing," and she finally discovers it, interest in her case does not lie so much in the actual discovery but in her attitude toward the discovery and in her conduct toward her lover who now appears to her in a new relation. If an animated woman is seduced by a man whose personality is stronger than her own, as in August Strindberg's "Countess Julie," the interest is not so much in the actual seduction as in the emotional reaction of the woman thereafter. If an unhappy woman comes to a realization of

what real happiness is, as in J. Hartley Manners' "Happiness," one is eager to observe her in the light of her new conception. Human nature is frequently less concerned with the crucial moment itself than it is with what immediately results therefrom. The presentation of this result is the function of the End. Its existence as an organic and structural part of a play is demanded by the psychology of the human mind and the desires of the human heart.

From the point of view of art, the play must end when the story is complete; and very often it is not complete until one knows what has happened immediately *after* the crucial moment. So far as plot development is concerned, all is known to the audience when the crucial moment is reached; but instinctively it also wants to know what the final emotional reaction is. The significant aftermath shows how the characters are taking the result of the interplay of forces. The End is the after-consequences; it is the reaction upon the vital moment. After the outcome has been made sure, it must, for the audience at least, still be brought to pass; the emotional reaction of the characters must be made clear in concrete objective action.

As a matter of fact, as one studies and observes the effect of One-act plays upon an assembled group, it not infrequently happens that

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the situation, the dramatic picture, the emotional reaction immediately following the crucial moment, is far more moving to the audience than is the crucial moment itself. Usually this vital point is more tense and more dynamically exciting, but the End is often more moving because it reveals the personalities of the characters when they unburden their emotions with complete abandon. It is in the End that the full significance of the crucial moment is revealed in a flash. The experience of human life is that it is not the catastrophe which is so moving, but that which immediately follows when one recognizes the full significance of the catastrophe. The after-effect, the sudden readjustment, the recognition of the seriousness of a crucial moment, is frequently the thing that stirs the emotions profoundly. It is because of this that the End of such plays as Mary Aldis's "Extreme Unction," Lewis Beach's "The Clod," J. Hartley Manners' "The Day of Dupes," and Fenn and Price's "'Op-o'-Mc-Thumb," are much more moving and rich in emotional values than their crucial moments.

From a structural point of view the End is always complemental to the plot and particularly to the crucial moment. If the final situation discloses that a change in relation between characters has taken place, the dramatist must show that the relations have changed; if it reveals

the inner personality of some character, that character must be shown in the light of his elemental traits. If a crucial test has made some character dejected, he must be shown as being dejected; and if it has taken the very life hope out of some one and made him deeply unhappy, the unhappiness must be made manifest. Without the End, a One-act play would not be a complete unit. From a structural and a psychological point of view, the End is an essential and organic part of the play.

The playwright must keep in mind that in the One-act form there is little or no "falling action" as is often found in longer plays; there is a decisive moment and its immediate sequel, —the immediate emotional reaction. Accordingly, since the End is an immediate sequel, its nature varies with every theme and with every plot: a serious play cannot well have a humorous ending, and vice versa. The End must be logical else it is naught. There must be no new note nor any false emphasis. Since the End is the result of what has culminated in the crucial moment, it must emphasize anew the dramatic note of the whole play; if it does not do this, attention is directed to matters not an organic and vital element in the play. Such an End is found in J. Hartley Manners' "Happiness," wherein the crucial moment comes when the blasé *Mrs. Chrystal-Pole* learns from a work-

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a-day girl, *Jenny*, that happiness is just "Look-in' forward." *Mrs. Chrystal-Pole* has invited *Jenny* and her mother to be guests at dinner. The play closes—

*Mrs. Chrystal-Pole*: (Presses her down onto the couch into a comfortable position, then goes to *Chandos*.) If there were more like *her*, there would be fewer like *us*.

*Chandos*: Why?

*Mrs. Chrystal-Pole*: She's a real human being. She's found what we've never known.

*Chandos*: Yes?

*Mrs. Chrystal-Pole*: Happiness.

*Jenny*: (Nervously locking and unlocking her fingers, a worried look in her eyes, a tremor running through her thin little body, murmurs under her breath) I wonder if mother will come?

It is noteworthy that *Jenny's* closing speech, "I wonder if mother will come?" does not emphasize the theme of the play, is not a sequel and emotional reaction to the crucial moment in the play, but, on the contrary, directs attention to a new note which is not an organic factor in the plot. A similar false note, and accordingly a bad ending for a play, is seen in George Middleton's "Their Wife." When either of these plays is seen on the stage there is a curious unsatisfying effect at the close; the Ends thereof do not centre attention on the vital things of the play; they are not sequels

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which emphasize the reaction upon the vital situations of their plots.

The One-act play, when well wrought out, must end and not merely close. Only a few moments are at the disposal of the dramatist, and he must make the most of them. Nothing must be left to be explained further: there must be no dangling loose ends; the End must be final and complete. It must give the effect that the play not only has stopped but also has really finished. It should give a sense of rounded-out completeness; it should not leave a restless and dissatisfying after-feeling of something left incomplete. The more direct, the more brief, the more connotative the End, the more effective it usually is. The End is the *final enforcement* of the single effect; it supplements and closes the effect of the crucial moment.

The playwright must conceive the End of his play as a distinctive structural problem. While it is quite as much an organic part of a plot as is the Beginning and the Middle, like them, it needs to be dealt with as something of an individual unit. On the other hand, it is very closely interwoven with the final crisis of the plot movement: one may well imagine, in given cases, something of a slight halting of progress between the Beginning and the Middle, but no such condition may obtain in the



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connection between the Middle and the End. The two are very closely and organically interlocked; the one is the complement and fulfilment of the other. Only when the dramatist constructs his End in the full light of the crucial moment and its vital significance can he hope to achieve the most effective results.

It is not too much to say that the End is probably the most important and, at the same time, the most artificial aspect of the One-act play. Critics are generally agreed that the ending, more often than any other part of the finished product, makes or mars the play. If well done, it is a technical triumph; if ill done, it brands the dramatist as a novice. Moreover, the author is obliged to make his ending. In actual life there are no very ends; hence the playwright must construct one that is logical and satisfying. Life exhibits a continuous sequence of causation stretching on and on; and, since a play must have an end, its conclusion must, in any case, belie a law of nature. But art is not nature; and this is a precept that the playwright must keep in mind when he sets himself to the task of constructing the End. "Real life," says Sarcey, "has no dénouements. Nothing in it ends, because nothing in it begins. Everything continues. Everything happening reaches back at one end with a series of facts which preceded it, and passes on at

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the other end to lose itself in the series of facts which follow. The two extremes fade into the shadows and escape us. In the theatre one must cut at some definite point this uninterrupted stream of life, stop it at some *accident du rivage*." "Any end, therefore," says Clayton Hamilton, "to a novel or a play, must be in the nature of an artifice; and an ending must be planned not in accordance with life, which is lawless and illogical, but in accordance with art, where soul is harmony." The dramatist should not be careless or hasty in handling the End of his play: a single false note will spoil the whole art product.

### HOW TO END A PLAY

Whatever else the End of the One-act play must be, it should not be unemphatic as are a number of the endings of George Middleton's plays. In the three-act play, nowadays, one is sometimes willing that it may not end in a strong tableau or with an emphatic *mot de la fin*. Such an ending, however, does not give that direct, complete, and definite effect that the human mind desires when the play comes to a close. A good play gives the feeling that it is fundamentally about something; and the End is the place where this can be most effectively emphasized. The three-act play may have an

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unemphatic ending, but in the One-act form this is scarcely conducive to good dramatic effect. A weak ending is a very dangerous and often fatal fault. Unemphatic endings such as in J. Hartley Manners' "Happiness" and George Middleton's "Their Wife" not only fail to emphasize the central emotional value of the play but fail to emphasize anything at all that is organically essential to the plot.

There is no one best way of ending a play,—except that it should be short and to the point. The method of ending is determined largely by the nature of the plot-action and particularly by the crucial moment with which it has so close relation. Sometimes a play may stop abruptly: crucial moment and End may be merged into one, as in such plays as August Strindberg's "Pariah" and "Countess Julie." This method, however, is not very frequently used in current practice. In other cases, a few bits of a significant dialogue will reveal all and sum up the reaction. Again, a bit of significant pantomimic action and stage-business is most effective. And frequently a single bit of telling dialogue accompanied by highly interpretative pantomimic action carries the dramatic value of the play to the assembled group.

Lord Dunsany has ended his "The Lost Silk Hat" in a most effective manner by using just two speeches after the crucial moment has been

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expressed in the *Poet's* "My God! It is a duet."

(Servant answers bell, *Caller* says something inaudible. Exit through door.)

*Poet*: (rising, lifting hand) But let there be graven in brass upon this house: Romance was born again here out of due time and died young. (He sits down.)

(Enter *Laborer* and *Clerk* with *Policeman*. The music stops.)

*Policeman*: Anything wrong here?

*Poet*: Everything's wrong. They're going to kill Romance.

*Policeman*: (To *Labourer*) This gentleman doesn't seem quite right somehow.

*Laborer*: They're none of them quite right to-day. (Music starts again.)

*Poet*: My God! It is a duet.

*Policeman*: He seems a bit wrong, somehow.

*Laborer*: You should 'a seen the other one.

It is to be noted that these two bits of dialogue are direct reactions upon the crucial moment and that they also emphasize a dominant note and an important character in the play as a whole. Moreover, they state pretty much what the audience itself has thought and felt as it has observed the passing of the events of the plot.

Another very effective ending, composed largely of significant dialogue, is that of

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William Butler Yeats's "Cathleen ni Hoolihan." The inter-play of forces of the plot (*Michael's* love for *Delia* and his devotion to Ireland) comes to a decisive end when "*Michael* breaks away from *Delia* and goes out." The reason for his decision is most effectively emphasized in the two speeches which close the play.

*Delia*: Michael, Michael, you won't leave me! You won't join the French and we going to be married to-morrow! (She puts her arms about him. He turns to her as if about to yield.)

*Old Woman's* voice outside—

They shall be remembered for ever;

The people shall hear them for ever.

*Michael*: (breaks away from *Delia* and goes out.)

*Bridget*: (laying her hand on Patrick's arm) Did you see an old woman going down the path?

*Patrick*: I did not, but I saw a young girl and she had the walk of a queen.

On the Stage, this End is one of the most effective among current One-act plays.

Richard Harding Davis's "Blackmail" is an apt illustration of an ending composed wholly of stage-business and pantomime. The climactic speech is *Kelly's* "Of course, in self-defence, you fool, *of course*, in self-defence."

*Kelly*: (To 'phone) Some crank tried to shoot him up. Mr. Fallon fired back and killed

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him. (Pause.) No! Mr. Fallon killed *him*! (Pause.) Of course, in self-defence, you fool, *of course*, in self-defence!

*Kelly* slams back the receiver, and rising quickly, turns to the right and stands with hands on his hips, and back to audience, gazing down at *Mohun*. He does not once look at *Fallon*.

*Fallon*: (On hearing the words "in self-defence" sighs, smiles and, striking the match, lights the cigar as

*The Curtain Falls.*

Careful analysis of this End will show that the pantomimic action and stage-business given to both *Kelly* and *Fallon* reveal their individual reactions upon the crucial moment.

Lewis Beach's "The Clod," whose decisive end is full of action and whose plot contains two closely interwoven elements (the character thesis of the wife, *Mary*, and the story plot of a Northern soldier-spy's escape from Confederate pursuers) is very aptly ended by significant pantomime and a single speech on the part of *Mary*.

*Sergeant*: (bellowing and pointing to the fluid trickling on the floor) Have you tried to poison us, you God damn hag? (*Mary* screams, and the faces of the men turn white. It is like the cry of the animal goaded beyond endurance.)

*Mary*: (screeching) Call my coffee poi-

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son, will ye? Call me a hag? I'll learn ye! I'm a woman, and ye're drivin' me crazy. (Snatches the gun from the wall, points it at the *Sergeant*, and fires. Keeps on screeching. The *Sergeant* falls to the floor. *Dick* rushes for his gun.)

*Thaddeus*: Mary! Mary!

*Mary*: (aiming at *Dick*, and firing) I ain't a hag. I'm a woman, but ye're killin' me.

(*Dick* falls just as he reaches his gun. *Thaddeus* is in the corner with his hands over his ears. The *Northerner* stands on the stairs. *Mary* continues to pull the trigger of the empty gun. The *Northerner* is motionless for a moment; then he goes to *Thaddeus* and shakes him.)

*Northerner*: Go get my horse, quick! (*Thaddeus* obeys. The *Northerner* turns to *Mary*. She gazes at him, but does not understand a word he says.)

*Northerner*: (with great fervor) I'm ashamed of what I said. The whole country will hear of this, and you. (Takes her hand, and presses it to his lips; then turns and hurries out of the house. *Mary* still holds the gun in her hand. She pushes a strand of grey hair back from her face, and begins to pick up the fragments of the broken coffee cup.)

*Mary*: (in dead, flat tone) I'll have to

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drink out of the tin cup now. (The hoof-beats of the *Northerner's* horse are heard.)

*Curtain.*

The pantomime business of the soldier emphasizes the fact that he has escaped, while the stage-business at the close makes this still more certain; and the final speech of Mary is an expression of emotional reaction on the vital happenings of the plot. This dual aspect of this End complements the dual aspect of the crucial moment which is the result of two closely interwoven plot elements. From a technical point of view, Mr. Beach has been equal to the task imposed upon him by the nature of his play.

Whatever the nature of the End of the One-act dramatic form, *the closing speech is a very important matter*. The success of the play often depends almost wholly on this final bit of dialogue. It is the thing which rounds off the whole dramatic action and gives a satisfying sense of finality to the completed work. Often the line is strongly emotional; sometimes it expresses with complete abandon the feelings of the character who has been most strongly affected by the decisive moment. The closing speeches in Alfred Sutro's "The Correct Thing," Percival Wilde's "The Finger of God," and George Middleton's "The Cheat of Pity" are examples. In some cases, the final line is strong in its revelation of character. In Lewis



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Beach's "The Clod," *Mary*, "in dead, flat tone," says, "I'll have to drink out of the tin cup now." The village attorney at the close of the play, "The Village Lawyer," as he sees the money, which he had saved bit by bit to buy himself a clarinet, disappear with the poor woman whom he had befriended, says, "Maybe I couldn't play the darned thing anyway." Again the closing speech may emphasize an observation of life as exemplified in the play. Sir James M. Barrie's "The Will" closes thus,—"Philip (summing up his life): It can't be done with money, sir." Arthur Schnitzler closes his "Dying Pangs" (*Anatol* play) thus,—"*Anatol*: She asked for that kiss, and it makes her another cheap woman at last—(then to himself in the glass) And you're a fool—a fool!" The final line may be the out-pouring of a human soul in the light of its bitter experiences. Thus Alfred Sutro's "The Man on the Curb" closes,—"*Joe* (staggering forward with a sudden) God, Oh God, give us bread!" J. Hartley Manners' "The Day of Dupes" ends,—"(The *Dupe* turns away from the window and looking upwards in an attitude of prayer, she pleads) Oh, Thou—Thou who once forgave the Magdalene,—I come to You—even as she did—covered in sin, an outcast of mankind, despised of women. I come to You to pray You to help me to walk alone!" In

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comedy, usually the final line gives rise to a good laugh, as in Edgar Allan Woolf's "The Lollard,"—"Miss Carey (going to put out light): Now, Thank Gawd, I'll get a little sleep." The closing speech of the One-act play is one of the most important details of construction; the effective handling of this line often differentiates the expert from the novice. A final injunction to the playwright is, look well to your closing speech!

## CHAPTER IX

### DRAMATIC CHARACTERIZATION

#### THE ELEMENTS OF DRAMATIC CHARACTER

It is pretty well agreed that, in the One-act play, plot comes first and character second. Once the playwright has selected his theme, and has determined what emotional response he wishes to provoke in his audience, the next step is the matter of its development and exemplification. Incident, character, dialogue, stage-business, and stage-setting, are the factors whereby a dramatic theme may be put into concrete form and presented on the stage; each factor plays its part in the evolution of the plot, each one contributes its part to the bringing-out of the singleness of effect. Among these factors, character is, no doubt, the strongest motive force in dramatic action; without it there could be no plot. Even if some critics are inclined to place plot first and character second, the dramatist must not conclude that the matter of characterization in the One-act play is not important. On the contrary, much of the dramatic value of the plot is directly

dependent on character; without dramatic character in the play there is little hope for its success.

Drama is action. And, since character is the most important motive force in plot evolution, it follows that a personality in a drama must be dynamic and not static, vital, and not insipid. A good dramatic character is one that is kinetic: it is strongly responsive to stimuli, and has large powers of emotional functioning. Moreover, whatever a dramatic character comes into contact with—character, incident, situation,—the character affects it in one way or another and is, in turn, itself affected; nothing remains as it was, there is constant progressive change. Character that is suitable for play purposes is emotional rather than highly intellectual; responsive rather than apathetic; vigorous in personality, rather than retiring. Its potential reserve is large; and it is ever motivated by its inherent human tendencies.

On the other hand, not all of the *dramatis personæ* of a play are dramatic in the strict sense of the term, nor is any one character completely dramatic at all times in the course of the plot evolution. Supernumeraries are seldom highly personalized and are seldom dramatic. Frequently they are only contrivances to forward the plot; sometimes they are foils

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to characters who are potentially dramatic; and again they are used to fill up the details of the stage picture. Indeed, it not infrequently happens that even a major character is but a foil to another major character who is the centre of the dramatic movement. Furthermore, since the essence of any One-act play is a series of minor crises leading to a crucial moment, it follows that the characters function most strongly in these crises. In trivial moments men and women act pretty much alike; but in vital crises they are individualized and differentiated by the varying degrees of intensity of emotional functioning and of dramatic action. It is in these crises of the play that character is most strongly dramatic.

Not only must a character of a play be dynamic in its possibilities, but its emotional functioning also must be of such nature as can be revealed and expressed in objective and concrete action. Personality must be revealed, not merely talked about. On the stage, character must be seen; it is ever manifested through behavior and conduct; each personality is presented through its outward expression of its inner emotional functioning. The playwright must create characters that can be *acted*; for play purposes, only external manifestations of character can be used. Experience has shown that the deep and profound psychological and

subjective functionings can not be well revealed in objective concrete action. Every character on the stage must be a concrete exemplification of his own personality; no one else can speak for him. If he is shrewd and clever, the playwright must show him to be so in the sight of everybody. If he is quick-tempered, he must "fly off the handle"; if he is vain, he must respond to flattery; and if he is treacherous, he must be shown in the act of betraying a trust or a friend. If he is a henpecked husband, he must meekly submit to the chastenings of his shrewish wife; if he is courageous, he must face an issue unflinchingly. If a woman has a high sense of virtue and honor, she must be seen in the moment when her womanhood resents the idea of unchastity; if another is scornful of well-meant attentions and treats them lightly, she must reveal it in the act of turning her back upon an admirer; if a wife fears her husband, she must shrink from his very presence. Action that is concrete and objective, not words, is the most effective means of revealing personality and character. On the stage, as in every-day life, seeing is believing.

In the next place, a dramatic character must be worth while; it must justify its existence and must merit the attention of the audience. Commonplace characters and insipid personalities are not sufficient stimuli to arouse the interest

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of the spectator. The average character from every-day life is so familiar and is of so little consequence that he has little to warrant giving attention to him. In daily activities, persons who are not worth while are not interesting and their acquaintance is not cultivated. Only those characters who give insight into human nature and exemplify it are worth while; only these merit attention. The man or the woman who interests the public is not the person of no consequence. On the contrary, it is the man or woman who is a moving factor of one kind or another in life's activities; it is the person who is virile and dynamic—the one who has a distinctive personality.

The playwright must not forget that the chief essential of dramatic character is a distinctive personality. It is this individual variation rather than fundamental human nature that produces the immediate interest of life. Only when a character is strongly possessed of some dominant human trait does he have personality, does he stand out as an individual and make his presence seen and felt. A man may be strongly bigoted or ardently democratic; he may have an open and wholesome frankness, or may shrewdly keep his own counsel; he may be generous to a fault, or may caustically drive a close bargain. If the character is a woman, she may be strongly maternal in her tendencies;

she may be primitive in her fondness of gaudy display; or she may be sentimentally romantic in her extremes of imagination. She may be generous and wholesome in the beauty of her womanhood, or she may be shrewish and even vampire-like. In any case, in order that it may be used in a play, a character must be possessed of some strong human tendency.

Because of the comparative brevity of a One-act play, a character therein must not be too complex in its personality. Usually but a single dominant trait is emphasized, such as vanity, egotism, devotion, fidelity, duplicity, generosity, shrewdness, sense of honor, maternal tendencies, or what not. Characters shown so fleetingly in a few selected moments of their whole lives, after the fashion of the stage, must be seen in high relief and in rather simplified form, if they are to be grasped clearly by the assembled group. Ordinarily it is the dominant, the decisive, the dynamic trait that is shown; all beyond this must be excluded or merely hinted at or suggested. Singleness of impression in the One-act form implies something of a singleness of effect in character; non-essentials, superfluities, extraneous elements, must be eliminated. The playwright should make no attempt at full details in characterization; he should select the pertinent elements only—or even one element only. If the



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analysis is too minute and the qualities too many or too varied, the observer may become confused in the maze and fail to grasp the personality of the character. Clearness and singleness of impression demand that nothing but the essentials be brought into view and emphasis requires that these essentials shall be made the most of.

Personality, however, is by no means so simple a matter as it may seem; indeed, it is the result or sum-total of effect of a number of contributory factors. In the first place, every personality must be fundamentally human; it must act and function emotionally in the light of basic natural impulses and instincts. As a matter of fact, stage characters are more primitive, more elemental, and more simplified than characters of every-day life; they are impelled to action by the generic forces of human nature,—love, anger, self-preservation, sex instinct, physical comfort. Love, and its manifestations of pity and devotion, is found among rich and poor, learned and unlearned; sex instinct is the fundamental motive force of association in almost every phase of human life; and self-preservation will impel a creature to go to the last extremity. In the second place, a personality must be characterized by class or type. Men differ from women in certain essentials; the various social types as well as racial types

are likewise differentiated in their tendencies; the followers of creeds, professions, and the like, have their individual traits. Rich and poor, rural and urban, learned and unlearned, professional and unprofessional; Jew and Gentile, orthodox and unorthodox; Slav and Teuton, Latin and Greek, Negro and White; Frenchman, Russian, Italian, etc.,—each is a distinct class or type. Brutality is a characteristic of ignorance, and vulgarity of the untutored; bigotry is often characteristic of extreme orthodoxy, and inconsistency of unorthodoxy; aggressiveness characterizes the Teuton, and passion the Latin. In the third place, a personality is individual in temperament due, so physiologists and psychologists hold, to the prevailing conditions of the nervous system. One person is generous in his love, another effusive and demonstrative, and a third is quiet and undemonstrative, but none the less devoted. One character is violent in his moments of anger, while another is tense and restrained. In the last case, a personality is usually characterized by some mannerism—individual physical action, method of speaking, method of mental functioning, a definite poise or bearing, a lazy-going gait, a lifting of the eyebrow, an habitual frowning, a peculiar use of the arms or the hands, an oddity or peculiarity of speech—which differentiates one being from another.

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Personality, then, is the manifestation of human nature in terms of individuality.

The dramatist is obliged to create character pretty much in the same way as he creates or builds a plot. Seldom will he find it ready-made in active life round about him. In everyday activities, a character is scarcely ever a distinctive motive force which is operative through a series of minor crises to a crucial moment; in the plot of a play, however, he is just such a factor, he is an organic and integral part of the whole structure. As a result, a character must ever be conceived in the light of the plot of which he is a structural and dynamic element. The personality must be toned down, toned up, manipulated, modified, moulded, or simplified, as the case may be, so that it will fit the case in hand. While one dominant trait is to be chiefly emphasized, it must not be over-emphasized at the expense of all other attendant elements; on the other hand, a character created is not a thing of shreds and patches, it is not a conglomerate or an inconsistency. The conceiving and handling of a virile dramatic personality is a problem in creative imagination.

## METHODS OF CHARACTERIZATION

Plot and character are so organically inter-related that the one can scarcely be conceived without the other. Both are fundamental in dramatic fiction. Moreover, since the plot of a One-act play is usually more or less simplified and must give rise to something of a singleness of impression, it follows that the dramatist must be deliberate in his choice of the kinds of character and of the number he shall use. In any case, he cannot use many; at most, he will not have more than two or three main characters with a supernumerary or two. Examination of several hundred One-act plays has revealed that the average number of characters to a play is between three and four. Among these there are usually two who are more or less prominently emphasized, although not infrequently only one is paramount,—all the others are but foils whereby the personality of the leading character is provoked and revealed. Simplification of plot demands that but few characters be used. Too many characters dissipate the attention, and too many qualities of personality are confusing. The playwright will do well to focus the attention of the audience upon one or two well-conceived and strongly personalized characters.

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The first step in characterization is to conceive clearly and definitely the individual personality of the character who is to become a motive force in the plot. "Women are women, and I am a woman; but I am I, and unlike them," says *Diana* in Meredith's "Diana of the Crossways." To the playwright, a character should appear as a concrete, living being whose impulses he is able to feel dramatically; the dramatist, in no small degree, should enter into the very personality of his chosen character in order that it may appear human and virile when seen upon the stage. The author should conceive his character in the light of the historical period with which the play may deal,—eighteenth century life was quite different from that of the twentieth, and Roman life different from Mediæval; he should conceive character in the light of the social class to which it belongs,—the élite differ from the illiterate; and he should conceive it in the light of the special conditions of the play,—war, politics, intrigue, domestic trouble, lovers' quarrel, or what you will. A character should be so real to the dramatist that he will feel and know just how a given personality will respond to given stimuli; and he must conceive in what kind of concrete objective action the character will reveal this response. Again, since the One-act play is largely a series of crises, it follows, too, that

the playwright should visualize clearly how his character will sense a critical situation, how it will deliberate over its solution, and how it will meet the issue with decisive action of one kind or another.

Having conceived the character in the by and large, the dramatist must next proceed to simplify the whole to its essential elements. A dramatic character is both generic and specific; the universal is revealed in terms of the individual. In the case of the One-act play, where plot is very much simplified, the author must eliminate any trait of personality which is not a contributory element to the plot motive; he must reduce the character to its lowest terms, to its very fundamentals. *Sir Harry*, in Sir James M. Barrie's "The Twelve Pound Look," is essentially a vain egotist; *Mary*, in Lewis Beach's "The Clod," is fundamentally a primitive and ignorant woman goaded to violently angry action by the rude criticism of two Confederate soldiers who have entered her home in search of a Union spy. *Janet York*, in George Middleton's "Criminals" is a wholesome, innocent girl who is suddenly aroused to rebellious shame by the shock of having learned the physical facts of life; and *Hedvig*, in Marion Craig Wentworth's "War Brides," is a woman whose high sense of the sacredness of marriage and motherhood has been outraged. Analysis of

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the characters of the leading One-act plays has shown that the personalities are very much simplified and reduced to but one or two dominant traits.

The playwright must not forget that once the curtain is up, he cannot halt his play to describe or to personalize his characters. In a novel or in a short-story, description is, of course, a part of the method. In a play, on the other hand, the characters have no other course but to act. Their appearance, their personality, and their relations to each other, are *seen* by the assembled group; all these things must appear in their dress, their actions, and their conversation. Each must stand on its own feet and speak for itself: there is no interpreter who stands between the characters and the audience. In the printed form of the play, however, the dramatist may materially aid his public and the actor by using descriptions of personality and appearance. These descriptions appear either in the introductory material and setting at the beginning of the play, or in connection with the stage-business often inserted at the point where a character makes its first entrance in the play.

Most current plays make use of such descriptive material. In the setting to George Middleton's "Criminals," *Mr.* and *Mrs. York* are personalized and described thus:

*York*, in his late forties, is a rather obvious kindly man with a genial voice and gentle manner. He wears a frock coat.

*Mrs. York*, somewhat younger, is also a lovable personality who has expended all her energies within the concentrated limits of her home life. She still wears her formal grey afternoon gown.

An examination of Mr. Middleton's other plays will reveal that in practically each one of them he resorts to this method of auxiliary description and personalization. The playwright of to-day may follow the example to advantage; but he should not be encouraged to be so profuse in these descriptions as is Sir James M. Barrie in his "Pantaloons," "The Twelve Pound Look" and "Rosalind," the interesting reading in these introductions notwithstanding.

Again, in the printed stage-direction which usually accompanies the first entrance of a character and in the stage-business accompanying a speech, the dramatist may describe or may personalize his characters. Sir James M. Barrie, in his "The Twelve Pound Look," describes and personalizes *Kate* thus: (. . . She is a mere typist, dressed in uncommonly good taste, but at contemptibly small expense, and she is carrying her type-writer in a friendly way rather than as a badge of slavery, as of course it is. Her eye is clear; and, in odd contrast



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to Lady Sims, she is self-reliant and serene.) Thomas H. Dickinson, in his "In Hospital," describes and personalizes the *Husband* in the following: (After a pause the centre door opens slowly, and the husband appears. He is haggard, his clothes have a general air of neglect, his eyes are tired for lack of sleep. He carries his hat negligently crushed in his hand.) Richard Harding Davis, in his "Black-mail," personalizes *Louis Mohun* as he enters. (*Mohun* enters door left. He is lean, keen faced, watchful. He is a head taller than *Fallon*. His manner always watchful has an undercurrent of insolence.) J. Hartley Manners, in his "Happiness," gives one a clear idea of *Jenny*,—(*Chandos*—admits *Jenny*, a shop-girl, carrying two large boxes, one containing a dress and the other a hat. She is a small, thin, shabby girl of nineteen with keen bright eyes, a quiet, rapid delivery and a whole-hearted healthy, exuberant manner.) The many bits of stage-business accompanying dialogue, as it appears in the printed play, are familiar to every student of One-act plays; such words as *wearily*, *heatedly*, *doggedly*, *with conviction*, *chagrined*, *violently*, *irritated*, *suavely*, *flashing*, *playfully*, *pouting*, and dozens of other phrases indicating suggestive action are used to good advantage by the playwright. On the other hand, the author must not forget that these

descriptions, whether they appear in the setting or stage-business, cannot be a part of the acted play, and in no case may they be a substitute for the dramatic values and action which must appear in concrete form on the stage. They are for the benefit of only the reader and the actor.

Probably one of the most effective ways of characterizing is by revealing the emotional reaction of one human being toward the other when the two are brought together under conditions which are conducive to the bringing out of their latent dynamic qualities. *Fallon*, in Richard Harding Davis's "Blackmail," proves to be a man of unusual high sense of honor and of courageous action because he responds to the stimuli of the story of *Mrs. Howard*, who, in her own simple way, reveals her suffering and shameful humiliation at the hand of *Louis Mohun* who has cruelly blackmailed her. *Sir Harry*, in Sir James M. Barrie's "The Twelve Pound Look," is revealed as a vain egotist by the stimuli offered by *Kate* and *Lady Sims*. In August Strindberg's "Pariah," the personalities of the two characters therein are very effectively portrayed by a reciprocal reaction of one upon the other; and in his "Countess Julie," the character of *Julie*, a bold, vivacious girl who "played with fire and got burned," is revealed by her reaction on the cruel and ill-

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minded *Jean*. In Lady Gregory's "The Workhouse Ward," in the inter-reaction between the two Irishmen in the play, a personal family pride and a tendency to quarrel, coupled with a fondness for companionship, are personal traits that are emphasized. Very often this method of characterization results in contrasting one personality with another, with the result that they stand out in bold relief.

Another effective way by which a playwright may characterize, is that of revealing to the full the latent inner personality at a crucial and vital moment. It is in a moment of crisis that the soul is laid bare, that all conventional restraint drops off like a mask and the emotional functioning is free and untrammelled. In Alfred Sutro's "The Correct Thing," the fine womanhood of *Kitty Bellamy* is not fully revealed until the crucial moment, and then it comes like a flash! It is often the way in which a human being meets a vital issue that its real character is revealed. In Lewis Beach's "The Clod," the deeply primitive nature of *Mary* is most effectively revealed in her terrible fit of anger provoked by the uncomplimentary remarks of two Confederate soldiers about the coffee she had been compelled to make for them. Vital crises and crucial moments are the rarest opportunities for the playwright to emphasize

the real personality of his characters for his audience.

Usually a character may be effectively portrayed through his speech,—through the dialogue of the play. Not only what is said but also the way it is said is significant. In Percival Wilde's dramatic episode, "The Traitor," the very first speech—*Mac Laurin* (vehemently): "It's hell, Colonel, that's what it is! It's hell!"—thoroughly individualizes *Mac Laurin*, and he speaks "in character" throughout the play. The enthusiastic and wholesome working-girl, *Jenny*, in J. Hartley Manners' "Happiness" is happily characterized by her speeches as well as by the accompanying stage-business. In response to *Mrs. Chrystal-Pole's*, "You poor little thing! (Takes one of *Jenny's* hands.)", *Jenny* says, "(Slowly taking her hand away) Oh, I'm all right, lady. I'm very healthy and very strong. Of course, I'm small to look at, but I'm really very *big inside*. Ye know, I *feel big*. Did ye ever see a little dog that thought he was a great, big bloodhound? *That's* me. I've got great big thoughts, etc." The dialogue of the *Emperor* in Sir James M. Barrie's "Der Tag," effectively characterizes his Imperial Majesty, as is revealed in the little scene which follows the *Spirit of Culture's* warning not to invade Belgium.

(She goes. He is left in two minds. He

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crosses to sign. He flings down the pen. He strikes the bell. *Chancellor* and *Officer* re-appear.)

*Chancellor:* Your Imperial Majesty has signed?

*Emperor:* Thus. (He tears the paper.)

*Officer:* Sire!

*Emperor:* Say this to Russia, France, and Britain in my Imperial name: So long as they keep within their borders I remain in mine.

*Officer:* But, Sire——

*Emperor:* You know, as I do, that it is all they ask for.

*Chancellor:* You were the friend of Austria.

*Emperor:* I'll prove it. Tell her from me that Servia has yielded on every point which doth become a nation and that Austria may accept her terms.

*Chancellor:* Nay, Sire——

*Emperor:* And so, there will be no war.

*Officer:* Sire, we beg——

*Emperor:* These are my commands. (They have to go, chagrined, but deferential.)

Too often the playwright neglects to take into consideration the value of nice details as an aid to characterization. Personality is often revealed through one's bearing and decorum; a character may be graceful or awkward, stooped or erect, vivacious or weary, queenly or hag-like. Often the attitude of one

character toward its associates gives insight into his nature: he may be modest and shrinking, or domineering and boastful; he may be polite and deferential, or ill-mannered and boorish. Qualities of temperament are usually an index to personality: a person may be stern, irritable, cautious, secretive, quick-tempered, flighty. Dress, too, is frequently indicative of personality: neatness, love of adornment, slovenliness, bright colors, modish garments, quality of materials, design, are suggestive. Again, qualities of the speaking voice individualize a character: whether harsh or soothing, deep or high-pitched, thin and piping or full and voluminous, the qualities of the voice are usually complementary to qualities of personality, and in the theatre one is prone to associate one with the other. Lastly, the physical features of a person often are indicative of personality: sharp features and small, keen eyes suggest shrewdness; good nature appears in the lines about the eyes and mouth; foolishness is often revealed in the big leering mouth; thick, red neck and heavy, square jaw suggest an arrogant and domineering nature. The author, in using these details, must not forget that they must appear in the descriptive material of the setting or the stage-business; he cannot halt the action of his play and call attention to them.

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Furthermore, too many playwrights forget that the *name* given to a character is often an index to its personality. In fiction of any kind, and particularly on the stage, names convey suggestions of personality, and arouse congruous or incongruous associations by reason of the sounds of which they are composed. Any student of literature or devotee of the stage knows from experience that some names fit certain characters and others do not. Moreover, not infrequently the name of the character tends to prejudice one for or against it. Among the many given names, Jennie, Maggie, Clara, Ann, Tillie, are often found to be attached to middle-class heroines of the servant-girl type; whereas, Priscilla, Annette, Dorcas, are Puritan-like and modest. Claude and Percival are erratic; Clifford is weak and unstable; Reginald, Robert, Ralph, are dignified and courtier-like. Henry, Ruth, John, William, Kate, Emily, Samuel, are solid and devoid of affectation; and Benson, Peters, Judson, Squires, Martin, are names for butlers and footmen. Again it is noteworthy that certain combinations of names are quite suggestive; Mrs. Chrystal-Pole, Lady Sims, Madam Chenoweth are a bit aristocratic; Clifford Waite and Harvey Western are weak; Frank Sterling, Craig Gordon, Arnold Bennett, are thoroughgoing. National and racial types may be indi-

cated by appropriate names; as, O'Brien, Beauchard, Prosser, Skelton, and Levinsky. Experience has shown that it is not good dramaturgy to give a character such insipid names as "A man," "A woman," "He," "She"; "The Husband," "The Wife"; "Madam X," "Madam Y"; "Mrs. X," "Mr. Y"; "Father," "Mother," "Daughter." To attach a name to a character that does not tend to give it personality and distinction is to place it under a handicap. The average theatre-goer naturally associates a name with certain traits of character; and it is the obligation of the playwright to resort to every effective and legitimate means at his disposal to get definite impressions to his audience. In any case, he should not be so careless and neglectful as to give to a character such a name as will prove an obstacle to the understanding and appreciation of its personality.



## CHAPTER X

### DRAMATIC DIALOGUE

#### THE FUNCTION OF DRAMATIC DIALOGUE

THERE prevails, in certain quarters at least, something of a misconception about the nature and importance of dramatic dialogue. A number of critics seem to think that the reputed testimony of Menander, of Eugene Scribe and others, is to be taken as *prima facie* evidence that if the plot and the characters are well conceived there is little need to give much serious attention to the matter of dialogue. "It is composed and ready; I have only the verses to write," Plutarch reports Menander as having replied to an inquiry about his new play. "When my subject is good," says Eugene Scribe, "when my scenario (plot) is very clear, very complete, I might have the play written by my servant; he would be sustained by the situations;—and the play would succeed." A contemporary writer asserts that dialogue is "one of the least important elements of the playlet—yet a decorative element which wit and cleverness can make exceedingly valuable," and that

"dialogue is merely the playlet's clothes," and that "Every play is, in the last analysis, a pantomime. Words are unnecessary to tell a stage story.—Words can only embellish it." Such assertions as these appear very well in print and tend to make the beginner in play-writing feel that the matter of composing dramatic dialogue is not a very important one.

A word of warning is here in point. Such statements as these are misleading, though probably unintentionally so. Assertions of this kind usually have one of several sources: one is that of the skilled writer who does his work apparently so easily and so well that he, unconsciously perhaps, wholly underestimates what real effort he puts into his finished product; another is that of the novice or the amateur who has not yet arrived at a point where he fully realizes the fundamental nature of the various aspects of his craft; and, again, there is the critic who does not adequately conceive the real value of the elements of a play, and who, in his enthusiasm to encourage the writer, gives the impression that dialogue is merely a dress or an embellishment. A study of the world's dramatic masterpieces does not tend to impress one with the feeling that dramatic dialogue has been so considered by the playwrights. On the contrary, dramatic dialogue is a highly important and thoroughly

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organic part of a play. It is a constructive element quite as much as are plot and character.

Furthermore, the statement of a contemporary writer that dialogue in the drama should never begin until pantomime leaves off is also misleading. Every student of practical dramaturgy is quite agreed that a good play *is*, in its essence, a good pantomime; but to hold that dialogue should never begin until after pantomime has left off is ridiculous and absurd. As a matter of fact, the practice of every reputable dramatist is quite to the contrary. Moreover, one's experience in the play-house is that one desires not only to see the characters act but also to hear them speak; and even a casual observation of life shows that men and women, in expressing and revealing their ideas and emotions, employ simultaneously both pantomimic action and speech. If drama should approximate life, if it is to be characterized by verisimilitude, then action and dialogue go hand in hand. There is a reciprocal relation between the two; and the playwright should so construct his dialogue and his pantomimic action that in most cases they will be complementary to each other.

On the other hand, in practical playwriting, whenever pantomime may be employed to good effect, merely repetitive dialogue is not only uneconomical, but it is positively devitalizing.

The significant stroke of the razor to the neck by *Julie*, in August Strindberg's "Countess Julie," which so effectively suggests that suicide is the one way by which she can escape further humiliation, would be weak and merely explanatory if it were accompanied by repetitive dialogue. Oftentimes a thing may be made most emphatic by gesture, movement, facial expression or dramatic pause; when this is the case, the dramatist, merely to provide dialogue, should not express it in words also. On the other hand, there are always some things in every play, that no pantomime of any kind could make clear or effective; in such cases dialogue must be resorted to. Then too, it must be kept in mind that pantomime has its limitations, that, after all, it is not possible by the mere carriage of the head and shoulders to reveal one's nationality or by a significant squint of the eye always to reveal one's inner personality or motive. In such cases dialogue will have to come to the rescue. In any case, the dramatist should observe the law of economy of attention: he must convey his impressions to the assembled group with the least possible means and in the least possible time. Whenever pantomimic action will achieve the result, it should be used; whenever dialogue will secure the best effect, then *the two* should be used; and when the two used in complementary or co-

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operative relations secure the best effect, then the two should be used in conjunction. What the method of procedure shall be in any given case is a matter that must be left to the judgment of the individual playwright.

The nature of the dialogue used in any given place will depend almost entirely upon its function in the play. It may be used for exposition, for transition or connective purposes, for advancement of plot, for revelation of character, or for the purpose of revealing the ideas and feelings of characters at their moments of highest emotional functioning. Furthermore, not all dialogue used in a play is necessarily dramatic. Most of it is essentially dramatic, as a matter of course. It must be kept in mind that the basis of drama is crisis and that a play consists of a series of minor crises leading to a crucial moment. Obviously, the most dramatic dialogue would be coincident with the highest crucial points, whereas the dialogue used at the points of lower emotional excitement would tend toward the more commonplace speech. Analysis of the series of crises in Mary Aldis's "Extreme Unction," a beautiful and pathetic little play, or in John Millington Synge's "Riders to the Sea," or in Oliphant Down's "The Maker of Dreams," or in Lewis Beach's "The Clod," or in George Cram Cook and Susan Glaspell's "Suppressed Desires," will

reveal that the most strongly dramatic dialogue is coincident with the moments of highest emotional functioning.

In any play, there is need of getting certain facts before the audience. Usually a One-act play begins at a point where the plot forces have already assumed a rather significant and dramatic aspect. This means that certain precedent conditions, forces, activities, or what not, must be made clear if the play is to be appreciated fully. Sometimes such expository material is presented in the dialogue of the Beginning of the play as in Edgar Allan Woolf's "The Lollard," or in Percival Wilde's melodramatic "The Traitor," or in Lord Dunsany's "The Glittering Gate"; and sometimes there is much expository dialogue scattered throughout the middle of the play as an examination of Mary Aldis's "Extreme Unction," Sir James M. Barrie's "The Twelve Pound Look," August Strindberg's "Facing Death," and George Cram Cook and Susan Glaspell's "Suppressed Desires" will reveal. In the episode between the *Caller* and the *Poet*, in Lord Dunsany's "The Lost Silk Hat," the *Caller*, in expository dialogue, makes clear certain things which took place before the play opens and which are, in large measure, the basis for the dramatic action itself.

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*Caller:* I cannot. I can never enter that house again.

*Poet:* If you have committed a murder, by all means tell me. I am not sufficiently interested in ethics to wish to have you hanged for it.

*Caller:* Do I look like a murderer?

*Poet:* No, of course not. I am only saying that you can safely trust me, for not only does the statute book and its penalties rather tend to bore me, but murder itself has always had a certain fascination for me. I write delicate and fastidious lyrics, yet, strange as it may appear, I read every murder trial, and my sympathies are always with the prisoner.

*Caller:* But I tell you I am not a murderer.

*Poet:* Then what have you done?

*Caller:* I have quarrelled with a lady in that house and have sworn to join the Bosnians and die in Africa.

*Poet:* But this is beautiful.

*Caller:* Unfortunately I forgot my hat.

A second function of dialogue in a play is to connect and to blend into an effective sequence the various points and crises of a plot movement. A good playwright conceives his work as a study in a series of strong situations. These cannot be isolated one from the other, nor can there be marked hiatus between them. There must be adequate transition from one

crisis to the next; and, to secure the desired effect, there must be some dialogue of a transitional nature. The main function of such speeches is to blend the structural units of the play into smooth sequence. Very often this dialogue is the least dramatic of the play; nevertheless, it is always an organic part of the plot movement and is frequently the most difficult to handle.

In the third place, when pantomimic action will not advance or make clear the plot movement or the dramatic situation, dialogue must be used to get the desired effect. Frequently, such dialogue is highly organic in that it makes clear and emphasizes a given situation, indicates subsequent plot development, and prepares for some subsequent effect. This happy combination of functions is seen in the following excerpt from Richard Harding Davis's "Blackmail."

*Fallon:* Yes, but he's not dealing with a woman, now, he's dealing with a man, with boots on. Do as I tell you.

(*Mrs. Howard* sits at writing desk and takes receiver off telephone. *Fallon* leans against table right, puffing quickly on his cigar, and glancing impatiently at the valise that holds his revolver.)

*Mrs. Howard:* Give me the café, please. Is this the café? I want to speak to a Mr.



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Mohun, he is waiting to be called up—oh, thank you. (To *Fallon*) He's coming. (To 'phone) I have seen that man and he says he'll take up that debt, and pay it. Yes, now, at *once*. You're to wait for ten minutes, until he can get the money, and then, he'll telephone you to come up. I don't know, I'll ask. (To *Fallon*) He says it must be in *cash*.

*Fallon*: (Sarcastically) Why, certainly! That'll be all right. (*Mrs. Howard* places her hand over the mouthpiece.)

*Mrs. Howard*: I'll not let you pay him!

*Fallon*: I'm not going to! I'm going to *give* him just what's coming to him. Tell him, it'll be all right.

Lastly, dialogue, and herein lies its greatest function and highest possibilities, is used to reveal character and to express the ideas and feelings of the *dramatis personæ* at their moments of highest emotional functioning. Obviously such dialogue is most nearly coincident with the apex of crises and crucial moments; it is here that personality is most fully revealed and emotional expression is at its height; it is at such times that the dialogue is most moving. Indeed, *dramatic dialogue in its highest form may be defined as that speech which reveals the ideas and feelings of characters at their moments of highest emotional functioning*. In the chapter on Dramatic

Characterization, it was pointed out that dialogue could be used to reveal personality. The speeches put into the mouth of the *Poet* in Lord Dunsany's "The Lost Silk Hat" show him to be extremely sentimental and fanciful; and the speeches of *Sir Harry* in Sir James M. Barrie's "The Twelve Pound Look" show him to be a confirmed and stupid egotist. The utterance of the *Dupe* at the close of J. Hartley Manners' "The Day of Dupes," and the speeches of the *Wise Man* in William Butler Yeats's "The Hour-Glass," at the point where he realizes that he has led every one of his associates into unbelief and that, as a consequence, he is to die, reveal the feelings of these persons at moments of very strong emotional functioning. Almost any good One-act play is an example of the fact that dramatic dialogue which reveals personality and expresses strong emotion, is coincident with crises and crucial moments. Percival Wilde's melodramatic "The Finger of God" closes thus,—

(The telephone rings, harshly and shrilly. *Strickland* goes to the receiver.)

*Strickland*: (Quietly) Yes? . . . You're afraid I'm going to miss the train? . . . Yes? Well, I'm *going* to miss the train! . . . I'm going to stay and face the music! (Hysterically) I'm an honest man. (And furiously he pitches the telephone to the floor and stands

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panting, shivering, on the spot. From the window a soft radiance beckons, and trembling in every limb, putting out his hands as if to ward off some unseen obstacle, he moves there slowly.) Did you hear what I told him? I'm going to make good. I'm going to face the music! Because I'm an honest man! An honest man! (He gasps, stops abruptly, and in a sudden panic-stricken movement, tears the curtains down. The window is closed—has never been opened—but the girl has vanished. And as *Strickland*, burying his face in his hands, drops to his knees in awe,

### *The Curtain Falls.*

No dialogue of any kind must be allowed to get in the way either of plot or of characterization; it must not be merely dress or embellishment. As a matter of fact, dialogue is almost as organic an element in plot development as are character and incident. Every speech, on the other hand, must be justified by one reason or another; every bit of dialogue must perform some function,—exposition, transition, advancement of plot, revelation of character, expression of ideas and feelings at moments of high emotional functioning. There must be no surplus phrasing in the One-act play. And while the dramatist must ever keep in mind what his specific purpose is in using any given bit of dialogue, he should also remember that

that speech is best which at one and the same time performs several functions,—reveals character, advances the plot, and expresses deep emotion.

### THE CHARACTERISTICS OF DRAMATIC DIALOGUE

The most essential characteristic of dramatic dialogue is its emotional spontaneity. Dialogue must spring naturally from the situation and from the characters. “Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh,” is particularly true of dramatic utterance. It is in the moments of deep feeling that a character speaks with greatest abandon; his emotions are almost as spontaneous in being expressed as they are swift in surging through his being. His utterance is free from restraint of any kind; his personality and his feelings stand forth in all their essential values. He expresses himself in rather short, sharp, seemingly thoughtless, but vividly pulsating words of every-day life. Dramatic utterance is not formal, it is not studied; but it is enthusiastic and spontaneous.

Because of its strongly emotional element, dramatic dialogue constantly suggests and reveals a great deal more than it says. It is rich in latent values. It connotes more than it denotes. It reveals much more than it actually

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states. Suggestion is always more forcible than direct information. Moreover, it is this connotation and this latent emotional value that tend to provoke corresponding emotional functioning in the audience. "A listener," says Aristotle, "is always in sympathy with an emotional speaker, even though what he says is absolutely worthless." A good dramatic speech is always distilled to its lowest terms of emotional values. "Naturally," says Charlton Andrews, "the best dialogue of all is that which is not merely denotative but also connotative,—that which implies and suggests a freightage of emotional significance it could not possibly carry in actual expression."

A second characteristic of dramatic dialogue is its effective condensation. "And as the action is thus compacted and heightened," says Brander Matthews, "so must the dialogue also be condensed and strengthened. It is only a brief time that we have to spend in the theatre; and therefore must the speech of every character be stripped of the tautology, of the digressions, of the irrelevancies, which dilute every-day conversation." *Multum in parvo* is ever an aspect of heightened and impassioned speech. The playwright must ever concern himself not with what is said in actual life but with what must be said to express action and to reveal character in such way as to create dramatic

movement. Every speech must be reduced to a minimum of materials and yet it must be surcharged with values. To omit is a far more important matter than to include. A whole life must be compressed into a single speech and an entire vital experience into a single word.

Good dialogue, then, is not the speech of every-day life. It is not the commonplace question and answer; it is not the small talk of the drawing-room or of the gossip's corner. It is not the haphazard discussions, the illogical argument, or the inconsequential dispute that one hears as one passes along on the street or elsewhere. It is not the mere narration of a dramatic episode; nor is it mere wit and repartee. It is not the prolix and redundant every-day speech so grammatically faulty, so tedious, and so long-drawn-out. On the contrary, dramatic dialogue avoids and eliminates all the petty repetitions and digressions of ordinary conversation; and whatever material or phrasing is used, it must be arranged with a view to a single, forceful effect. Good, effective dialogue is obtained by eliminating the large amount of irrelevant, redundant, and verbose detail which persons ordinarily use; and it is the result of simplifying and heightening that part of the conversation which remains. Effective dialogue *seems* to be actual every-day speech, but it is really only its vital substance and manner. It

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is the condensed and heightened talk of real people.

Effective dialogue is the result of discriminative selection of essentials from every-day speech for purposes of presentation. All underbrush, all rubbish, all dead wood, must be eliminated. Good dramatic speech should be the selected parts of representative conversation when situation, mood, action, or character, give it especial value. In every-day life, lawless as is the sequence of its general activities, speech is not constructed to a given definite end. On the other hand, in a play, this is precisely what must be done; every bit of material and every bit of phrasing must be constructed with a view to a definite result. It has structure without its having any appearance of having been studied; it has force without its having any seeming intent or design to be so; it has verisimilitude without its employing the commonplaces and excesses of ordinary speech. It seems so natural that it does not reveal the fact that it has been somewhat thought out in advance.

In the third place, practicable dramatic dialogue is not necessarily stylistic and literary. For the most part any fineness of literary style is wasted on an audience who are moved by the emotional values in a speech rather than by any stylistic quality it may happen to possess. Tests, which have been conducted under a vari-

ety of conditions, have revealed the very interesting fact that the average audience is not capable of hearing whether dialogue is ill or well written. Few persons in the play-house are able to tell whether a play is written in prose or in verse. An assembled group seldom appreciates the added polish that lifts dialogue to the realm of literature and art. Emotional values, rather than turns of style, are what count in speech as heard in the theatre. For practical purposes dialogue should be literary only so far as an effective performance of the play will permit. On the other hand, the dramatist must remember that while stylistic writing is not a necessary element in the immediate merit of the play *as a play*, yet it must reach this point if the author would have his product take a place among the literary masterpieces.

Furthermore, dramatic dialogue is not that which necessarily scintillates with brilliancy and wit. Brilliant and witty conversation is all right and should be used if the characters into whose mouths it is put are consistently brilliant and witty. If such dialogue is not appropriate to the character, then there is just so much superimposed material that is not an organic part of the play. The playwright should not forget that his plot, his character, his dialogue, are to be used for the securing of a given singleness of effect, and that his play exists solely for the



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purpose of bodying forth a single conception of certain persons acting out a certain set of incidents until they reach a conclusive outcome. In any case, the finished product does not exist as a vehicle for the author's parade of his wit. Moreover, to attempt to be epigrammatic or witty when it is not one's forte to be so, is to engage in a very dangerous procedure. Clever or witty dialogue, scintillating with epigrams, repartee and *double entendre*, is not written by everybody. Too frequently, the real epigrammatist, or the humorist, is very liable to let his clever lines swamp and obscure his plot and dramatic action. The playwright should keep in mind that dialogue is not an end in constructing his play, but only a means; and that funny lines do not necessarily make fun for the audience. Too often any attempt at wit in dialogue results in little more than frank artificiality, clever conceits, and philosophical reflections, none of which have any organic function in the play.

Lastly, dramatic dialogue must be appropriate to the character—and, if it is appropriate to the character, it will be appropriate to the theme, plot, and tone of the play. Speech must fit personality and emotional functioning; just as characters differ, so must their dialogue differ. Frivolous speeches come from frivolous persons; rugged utterances from

those who are rugged in personality; and polished speech comes from the élite and cultured. The speech of an angry and irritable man is different from that of a mild-tempered one; a modest and retiring woman converses in a manner different from that of the one who is shrewish. The *Poet* in Lord Dunsany's "The Lost Silk Hat" speaks differently from the *Laborer* or the *Clerk* in the same play; and the manner of speech of *Richard Fallon* in Richard Harding Davis's "Blackmail" varies from that of the motherly *Mrs. Howard* and the villainous *Louis Mohun*. The blasé *Mrs. Chrystal-Pole* and the work-a-day girl, *Jenny*, in J. Hartley Manners' "Happiness," are essentially different characters and they speak differently, too. Ranchmen, vendors, clergymen, social belles, Hebrew gentlemen, seamen, should be as clearly differentiated in their dialogue as they are distinctive in personalities. Any bit of dialogue that does not fit the character is a fundamentally false dramatic note.

The secret of writing good dialogue lies almost wholly in the ability of the playwright to put himself into the place of the character. To think and to feel as the character would think and feel when placed in a given situation and then to express the gist of that thinking and feeling is his real problem. He must ever keep in mind how his character is to appear to the

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audience and how it is to affect the assembled group. The spectators will grasp the essential values of the sentences, if they are short, direct, crisp, rather than long, involved, and loose-jointed. He must remember, also, that although in ordinary life conversation shifts rapidly and irrelevantly from topic to topic, fiction dialogue must ever be so directed that it will be progressive to a given end. In active life dialogue meanders leisurely, but on the stage it never does. Indeed, "The work of the theatre," says Sarcey, "is above all a work of condensation. The mind of the author must make all the reflections, his heart must experience all the sentiments the subject comprises, but on condition that he give to the spectator only the substance of them. This phrase should sum up twenty pages; that word should contain the gist of twenty phrases. It is for the playgoer, who is our collaborator much more than we realize, to find in the little that is said to him all that which is not said; and he will never fail to do so, so long as the phrase is just and word true."

## CHAPTER XI

### STAGE DIRECTION AND STAGE SETTING

#### THE FUNCTION OF STAGE DIRECTION

ECONOMY of time and of means is a fundamental precept in the One-act play. No drama aims to tell a complete narrative in all its details; it gets its effect by presenting only the crucial points and crises of a given dramatic story in such a way that they connote and suggest the whole. Real drama is not leisurely, but it is characterized by rapid and tense action and by economic condensation. Because of this, only the essentials of a given story are selected for the plot; dialogue is distilled to the essence of what otherwise would be tedious and commonplace speech; only a few dominant traits of character are used; and the playwright is obliged to tell as much of his story as he can in objective, concrete actions that speak louder than words. "The playwright," says Charlton Andrews in "The Technique of Play Writing," "will do well to make sure early in his labors that he is telling his story concretely to the *eye*. This is what especially counts in our

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day. A little surreptitious, dishonest movement on the part of a protesting 'saint' will convey volumes of information on the subject of his hypocrisy. All that he can possibly say, or that others can say about him, may not accomplish half so much. The keen-eyed dramatist looks about him in life for these character-revealing motions which are the essence of drama." To present with greatest economy of time and means a picture of life in verisimilitude and in such way as to provoke the desired response in the audience is the problem of the playwright. In order that he may secure this end, he uses every means at his disposal,—character, incident, situation, plot, dialogue, stage direction, and stage setting.

One of the most significant aspects of the work of playwriting is the effective handling of characters on the stage. The dramatist must so handle the personages in the play that they will evolve the plot movement and will also, at the same time, reveal their dominant traits in objective and connotative demeanor. The author must so use his characters that there is a constantly progressive plot-action; and he must get them off and on the stage at singularly opportune times and in most effective manner. He must, by interpretative stage directions, move his characters from one part of the stage to another as occasion may necessi-

tate; and he must, in like manner, reveal the peculiarities of his characters as well as indicate their individual temperament and conduct. A play is a concrete picture in progressive action that appeals, very largely, directly to the eye. Objective and concrete stage direction is not only an economical aid in making clear and effective the dramatic movement of a play, but it is also a very vital factor in giving to the drama a sense of verisimilitude.

Stage direction has ever to be considered as an organic element in any plot movement; it is a structural factor quite as much as is dialogue. Every entrance, every exit, every movement to any part of the stage, and any significant bit of objective demeanor of a character, is an organic part of the plot-development. Indeed, the presentation of plot and of personality is almost wholly by means of the dialogue that is spoken, and by means of the movements and decorum of the characters as they appear on the stage. Sometimes dialogue can secure the desired effect, sometimes only stage business suffices; or, again, the two in combination is the most effective and economic means. In any case, stage direction is an organic and integral part of a play; it has a distinctive function to perform. Any stage direction that does not advance the plot, or

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does not interpret and reveal character has no justification for its existence.

In writing the stage direction for a One-act play, the dramatist should ever keep in mind the topography and the geography of the scene in which his play is laid. This comprises not only the scene directly before him, in which the immediate action takes place, but also the adjoining territory. If the scene is an interior, there are adjacent rooms and hallways to be kept in mind; and if the setting is out of doors, there is usually something of interest in juxtaposition. The playwright must not have characters enter from wrong directions or by doors through which they would not logically pass: if a character enters from a garden supposed to be at the left, he should not enter from the right; and if a person is supposed to pass into the drawing-room, he should not be made to go through the door leading into the bedroom or leading into the kitchen. Again, two characters must not be allowed to meet in the hallway or in the street when they are not supposed to see each other; and, if a character is to go on an errand of some sort, he must be given time enough to give at least a semblance of having done so. Stage direction demands studied attention; in no case should it be haphazard. Inaccurate stage direction spoils the whole effect of verisimilitude. Only when the play-

wright keeps in mind the details of topography and of geography of his scene, can he hope to be effective and free from glaring inconsistencies.

In general, the important function of stage direction is to condense the larger parts of the dramatic story to their essence and to present the plot as objectively and as wordlessly as is consistent with clearness and effectiveness. Few devotees of the theatre can recall what they have heard spoken on the stage, but many can well recount what they have seen. Every theatre-goer knows that the actions and stage business of characters are often a more effective source of both comedy and tragedy than is dialogue. Moreover, every one knows from experience how tedious and boring is dialogue that gets nowhere and that narrates what should be presented in concrete objective action. It is the function of stage business to do what dialogue cannot do, and to condense to a minimum what might otherwise be a long drawn out dramatic narrative.

Frequently, stage direction is used to make thoroughly clear those plot elements which dialogue could not well present. Richard Harding Davis's "Blackmail" has three or four masterly bits of such stage direction. To make clear to the audience just how *Fallon* is going to shoot *Mohun* and how he is going to conceal



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any evidence of cold-blooded murder, the following is put into the play,—

(He crosses to door centre, and taking key from the bedroom side, places it in keyhole on side of door in view of the audience. He turns the key several times. He takes the revolver from his left hip pocket and holding it in his right hand, rehearses shooting under his left arm through his coat which he holds from him by the fingers of his left hand. Shifting revolver to his left hand, he takes the automatic from his right hip pocket, and goes through the motions of firing with both guns in opposite directions. His pantomime must show how he intends making use of both guns at the same time, using one apparently upon himself, and the other, in earnest, upon another person. He replaces the revolvers in his pockets. There is a knock at the door.)

Again, in J. Hartley Manners' "Happiness," stage direction makes clear what no amount of dialogue would be adequate to present.

(*Jenny* undoes the bundles, humming vigorously all the time. She takes the hat out first and looks at it with a gasp of joy. Then she takes out the dress. She stares at it with wide open eyes. She thinks a moment, then listens intently—makes up her mind, throws off her jacket and slips the dress on. She laughs gleefully, whips off her hat and puts on the new

one and runs to the mirror to see her reflection. *Mrs. Pole* comes in quietly behind her and stands looking at her. *Jenny* sees *Mrs. Pole* in the mirror; she looks at her in horror, then turns guiltily, snatches off the hat and begins struggling to get out of the dress.)

More often, however, stage direction and dialogue are used in conjunction to secure the desired effect of condensation and clearness. Thus, in August Strindberg's "Countess Julie," the suggestion of the idea of *Julie's* suicide is made very effective.

*Julie*: What would you do in my place?

*Jean*: In your place—wait. As a noble lady, as a woman—fallen—I don't know. Yes, now I know.

*Julie*: (She takes up razor from table and makes gestures saying.) This?

*Jean*: Yes.

And later in the same play—

*Jean*: (Takes razor and puts it in her hand.)

—Go now while it is light—out to the hay loft

—and—(He whispers in her ear.)

—is most highly effective because of its grewsome suggestion. Again, Marion Craig Wentworth, in "War Brides," by a happy combination of dialogue and stage direction makes clear what otherwise would be a difficult matter to handle.

*Mother*: Hedwig has told you nothing?

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*Amelia*: No.

*Mother*: Ah, she is a strange girl! She asked me to keep it a secret,—I don't know why, but now I think you should know. See!

(Holds up tiny baby garments.)

Sometimes direction is used to break up long telephone conversations or to relieve what might otherwise be monotonous and uninteresting narrative comment. In J. Hartley Manners' "The Day of Dupes," the *Politician* speaks thus,—

*The Politician*: (looking at flowers) My bouquet! (Smells it.) Beautiful! Dear me, dear me! (Puts it down—sees another bouquet—takes it up.) H'm! Another! How distressing! Dear, dear. (He places it on a lower shelf of the revolving bookcase.) Quite so—quite so! (Surveys his own bouquet, with satisfaction, turns to mantel-piece, sees the framed portrait—takes it in his hand.) Oh dear, dear, dear—(Turns his head away.) How dreadful. Shocking! How could—she be photographed like that! How could she! (Fixes in eyeglass—examines it closely—gradually a pleased smile comes across his face.) Dear me! Wonderfully like her! Superb woman—superb! All the same I wish she wouldn't—(looking around). I wish she wouldn't—ah! (Goes to revolving bookcase and places photo on lower shelf, near the second bouquet.) That's better. Such a pity to have—er—*that*—in so—prominent a posi-

tion! Quite so—quite so! Dear me! (The clock strikes nine.) Nine. I must be in my seat by 10:30 to-night. The debate opens at eleven. (Stops before easel.) Beautiful! Very beautiful! Her own work too! (Takes out notes, looks at them, then speaks from memory.) “The man who gives his life wholly and solely to his country’s welfare—must be ready at any and at all times to—to— (His eye falls on the bouquet resting on the lounge.)—to his country’s welfare—” (Fixes his eyeglass, takes bouquet and examines it and reads card attached.) Dear, dear—this is very unnecessary. I wish—she didn’t know quite—so—many—people—(Deposits it on second shelf of bookcase, then resumes his speech.) “—to his country’s welfare—must be prepared at any and at all times to sacrifice his home, his kindred, the dearest wishes that bind him to—(Stares at bouquet on lid of piano.)—dearest wishes that——” Faugh! (Examines card.) Poetry! She has a large circle of—friends. A very large circle.

It is very interesting to note how this accompanying stage direction indicates movement from one part of the stage to another, how it suggests temperament in given cases, and how it reveals the real personality of the *Politician*.

Most frequently, however, stage direction is used to indicate the emotional functioning accompanying a given speech or action. Often

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such direction serves a number of ends: it may suggest the temperament of the character at the moment, it may emphasize a trait of personality, and it may indicate appropriate physical action. Thus *pensively, sternly, sharply, coquettishly, gallantly, cold and unmoved, ecstatically, shyly, bitterly, puzzled, sententiously, poignantly, alarmed, not understanding, offended, uncomfortably, with a fierce primitive cry of pain, reluctantly, beaming proudly throughout, trying to find words, persistently, with a sigh, angered, heatedly, pompously, modestly, cuttingly*, and dozens of others taken at random from contemporary plays, are highly suggestive and connotative. Almost every one is indicative of both the emotional functioning and the personal demeanor that accompanies the speech with which it is used. In J. Hartley Manners' "Just as Well," the stuttering *Captain Trawbridge* speaks thus,—

*Doleen*: Why, what has happened?

*Captain Trawbridge*: (Growing excited) It c-c-can't be. The f-f-fact is, I'm a fool. (Drops one of the books; picks it up.) I m-m-mean I've b-b-b-been a f-f-fool. (Drops the other.) D-d-damn! I beg your pardon.

*Doleen*: What do you mean?

*Captain Trawbridge*: (Replaces the books on the table and walks toward *Doleen*.) *Doleen*! I c-c-can't m-marry you on F-F-Friday.

Here the accompanying stage direction reveals temperament and personality and also indicates suggestive physical action.

The characteristic aspect of drama is action. The playwright is obliged to see to it that he keeps his characters doing something all the time, something, too, that is organic in the plot-development. It is scarcely necessary to say that this does not mean that the author should fill up his stage pictures with needless and aimless running about of characters; on the other hand, however, it does mean that something important in the dramatic action must be taking place all the time. Never should a character or a group of characters be left out of the picture; the dramatist must ever keep in mind just what each character or each group is doing. He must handle all the *dramatis personæ* all the time. He must never lose sight of them; he must never leave a character to appear as if he had forgotten it. The positions and the relations among the characters in each succeeding situation should be clearly visualized by the author. In no case should the stage be left empty, nor should it ever be unnecessarily overcrowded. Reception groups must be handled quite as carefully as the leading characters; a reception group may be retired to the rear of the stage or to one side of it, but the practical dramatist never forgets that it is there. Every

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character or group of characters must be used at all times,—in conversation, in stage action and stage direction, in plot development, or in fitting up or in dressing the stage picture. To secure these effects, stage direction is at the bidding of the playwright.

The question of *when* to use stage business is a matter that must be determined by the author. Each individual case is a separate dramatic problem. There is no general rule; a few suggestions, however, are not amiss. In no case, should stage direction be inserted for that which, from the context, is wholly obvious; and in no case should any be used that is not an organic and structural part of the play. Stage direction must never be superimposed and never be made a mere adjunct. Again, it should never be used to indicate a purely physical gesture which any actor would invent for himself. Unless the stage direction is conducive to further clearness, to condensation, or to added effectiveness, it should not be employed. Stage direction should never accompany a bit of dialogue when the speech itself makes clear how it should be uttered. On the other hand, if there is any question at all as to what the course of the action should be or what the emotional value of any speech should be, the playwright must not fail to make use of stage direction of a suggestive and explanatory kind. Not infre-

quently a speech, unaccompanied by stage directions, might be interpreted in two or three different ways; in such an event, stage direction of such kind should be employed that there will be no question as to the interpretation the author desires one to use. Only when it emphasizes, makes more clear, or condenses, is the addition of stage direction justifiable.

Furthermore, the *kind* of stage business to be employed in any given case must be determined by the individual circumstances. The dramatist must never lose sight of the effect he wishes to get; and then he must work with that constantly in view. In general, purely realistic and physical stage direction is to be excluded. Of course, any direction as to the movements of characters from one part of the stage to another or as to the exits and entrances, must be rather direct and prosaic statements of real physical action. On the other hand, slap-stick methods of any kind are wholly antiquated. Moreover, no stage direction should be used that attracts attention to itself; it should never be so extravagant, so bizarre, or so difficult that it emphasizes itself rather than directs attention to the play. Stage direction, to be effective, must be the body of the material's soul. The material must suggest the business and the action, so that the one will seem to be made alive by the other. Un-



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less it is appropriate, unless it is complementary to the dialogue, unless it is interpretative and suggestive, it is scarcely the kind that is an organic part of the play.

Good stage direction is not always an easy thing to conceive and by no means always easy to compose. Invariably it is condensed, and it is highly connotative. Experience in laboratory work in play-writing has shown that a good way to proceed is to write out pretty full dialogue and stage directions in the preliminary drafts. After this, there should be a process of elimination of the unessentials, and a distillation of what remains. Sometimes an emotion, an idea, or a plot factor can be condensed and best expressed in a speech, and again these can be made most clear and effective in a bit of stage direction. More often, however, the two are used in complementary conjunction. In general, the phrasing of stage direction should be simplified, direct, short, and highly connotative. It should never be too long, too prolix, or too diffuse. In no case should it be vague in meaning. Too much or too little stage direction reveals the ignorance or inexperience of the playwright; and no author who takes himself at all seriously will use the antiquated R. U. E., L. C., etc. It should always be written in the present tense and in the third person and should be idiomatically correct. The drama-

tist will do well to give unusual attention to the phrasing of his stage direction. It should be so expressed that it always adds a connotative significance to a line or to a dramatic situation. Unless it elucidates, unless it is a dramatic force, it has no justification for appearing in the play.

### THE FUNCTION OF STAGE SETTING

Times have materially changed since the days of Shakespeare when stage setting, in the modern acceptance of the term, was practically unknown. There is a striking contrast between the sceneless and uncovered stage of Elizabethan times and that of almost perfect illusion of the present-day *inscenierung*. The work of Gordon Craig and of Adolph Appia has not been in vain. Stage setting has come to be one of the finest of arts. As a matter of fact, stage setting is no longer for decorative purposes only; nor is scenery meant to be nothing more than "an unobtrusive yet decorative background against which a play is played." A setting has ceased to be merely a suggestive background against which the figures stand out in high relief. Nowadays, the stage aims to present a complete and organic picture with plot, character, dialogue, setting, and lighting, all harmoniously coöperating to a given singleness of impression.

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To-day the stage has for its ideal a picture with the characters not a little out of the picture, but completely in and of it. The stage setting exists as an organic part of the play. If it is designed or written for any other purpose than to be an integral and unifying factor in the drama, it is not a stage setting in the current acceptation of the term.

A One-act play written in one mood and presented in another is chaos and not art. Appropriateness and harmony between the play and the scene is the modern demand of the theatre. Artistic fitness is the *desideratum*. One of the first requirements of a setting for a One-act play is that it shall emphasize the dominant tone of the whole play. The main function of the scene is to direct attention to the play rather than direct attention to itself. The two should be complementary and organic in their relations. A scene must not be too large or too small; too detailed or too simple; the color scheme, the design, the properties, and especially the lighting effects, must be in closest harmony with the dominant idea and tone of the play.

The practical dramatist, nowadays, conceives his setting and his play as complementary elements; the spirit and tone of the one is the spirit and tone of the other. If one will study Constance Mackay's "The Beau of Bath," a

most delightful dramatic episode, one will find that it is rich in all the delicacy, charm, and fine sense of decorum, that characterized the élite life of the eighteenth century. The whole is set in the following scene:

Furniture and hangings of faded splendor. Candles gleam in silver sconces. Christmas holly hangs here and there. At the left a fire burns on the hearth, first with small blue dancing flames, then deepening to a rosy glow. At the right there is an inlaid desk with candles burning on it. Toward background a door opening into another room of the apartment. In the centre background hangs the life-sized portrait of a lady dressed in the fashion of the early eighteenth century. Her dress is a shimmer of rose-colored satin. Beneath her faintly powdered hair her face is young, dawn-tinted, starry-eyed. There are no other portraits in the room.

It is noteworthy that the significant details and the delicate colors harmonize with the spirit and tone of the play itself; the one cannot be separated from the other. The two are complementary and organic. Again, if one will study the settings of Thomas H. Dickinson's "In Hospital" and of George Middleton's "Criminals," one will find that the former has the tone and atmosphere of formal cheerfulness and the latter of formal and quiet cosiness, both of which

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are the dominant tones of the two plays. Furthermore, an examination of Alfred Sutro's "The Correct Thing," shows it to be a glimpse into the private life of *Kitty Bellany* and *D'Arcy Galbraith*. The quiet and private existence, the somewhat intimate associations, and the events following a theatre party, are put into the following setting:

The drawing-room of a pleasant little house that lies hidden away in a St. John's Wood garden. Its atmosphere is exceedingly bright and cheerful: the furniture and pictures, curtains and hangings, all bearing evidence of artistic and tasteful selection. A semi-grand piano, with a harp by its side, occupies one corner; in another a revolving bookcase stands, laden with books, whose covers proclaim them of a somewhat serious nature, while others fill various little dainty shelves let into the wall. An old-fashioned writing desk stands by the window. On a small table, in the centre of the room, supper is laid for two. A bright fire burns in the grate. The hour is close upon midnight.

Sometimes the playwright may conceive a setting which not only emphasizes the tone of the play but also reveals something of the personalities and habits of life of the characters. A very happy combination of these two effects

is in the setting of Sir James M. Barrie's "Pantaloons."

We should now be able to reconstitute *Pantaloons's* parlor. It is agreeably stuffy, with two windows and a recess between them, from which one may peep both ways for the policeman. The furniture is in horse-hair, no rents showing, because careful *Columbine* has covered them with antimacassars. All the chairs (but not the sofa) are as sound of limb as they look except one, and *Columbine*, who is as light as an air balloon, can sit on this one even with her feet off the floor. Though the time is summer there is a fire burning, so that *Pantaloons* need never eat his sausages raw, which he might do inadvertently if *Columbine* did not take them gently from his hand. There is a cosy round table with a wax-cloth cover adhering to it like a sticking-plaster, and this table is set for tea. Histrionic dignity is given to the room by a large wicker trunk in which *Pantaloons's* treasures are packed when he travels by rail, and on it is a printed intimation that he is one of the brightest wits on earth. *Columbine* could be crushed, concertina-like, into half of this trunk, and it may be that she sometimes travels thus to save her ticket. Between the windows hangs a glass case, such as those at inns wherein Piscator preserves his stuffed pike, but this one contains a poker. It is interesting to note that

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*Pantaloön* is sufficiently catholic in his tastes to spare a favorable eye for other arts than his own. There are various paintings on the walls, all of himself, with the exception of a small one of his wife. These represent him not in humorous act but for all time, as, for instance, leaning on a bracket and reading a book, with one finger laid lightly against his nose.

A good precept, nowadays, is that, in stage setting, the author should not aim at realism or at idealism, but rather at suggestion and connotation. Local color and bold realism are no longer so much in vogue. The dramatist should aim at getting tone and *quality* in his scene rather than accuracy of realistic detail. Verisimilitude is not the essential requirement. On the contrary, design, color, properties, costumes, should be so selected and so combined as to secure a tone and quality that harmonize with the dominant note of the play. One scene suggests work, another idleness; one suggests quietness, another strife and unrest; one suggests warmth and optimism, another gloom and even foreboding. In any given case, the details of the setting must be chosen for their suggestive power, for their value and their quality rather than for their verisimilitude or for their amount.

Thus in the setting for George Middleton's "The Cheat of Pity," the details selected—a

dark room, rain heard pattering against the window panes, fire low in the grate, fashionably furnished drawing-room, high ceilings, draperies, etc.,—give a distinct quality and tone to the scene.

The room is dark; outside the rain is heard pattering against the panes; the fire is low in the grate at the left, yet betrays the general outlines of a fashionably furnished drawing-room with high ceilings, tastefully papered walls, and long windows at the right. In the back, curtains drape the archway, and dimly the stairs are seen beyond, crossing down out of sight. An elaborate chandelier with glass pendants hangs in the centre.

Again, the setting to Arthur Schnitzler's "Dying Pangs" contains details which, while few in number, are quite suggestive of quality and are highly effective when seen on the stage.

One spring afternoon it is growing dusk in *Anatol's* room, though through the open window the broad expanse of sky still shines clear and blue.

In both these cases the tone and quality of the scenes are in harmony with the tone and quality of the dramatic mood of the plays.

Not all settings, however, can be so organically fitted to their plays; not all plays are so highly individualized in quality and in tone. The settings of such plays as Richard Harding



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Davis's "Miss Civilization" and Zona Gale's "Neighbors" are rather free from any definite tone or quality. The setting for August Strindberg's "Countess Julie" is little more than a presentation of the concrete details of the scene.

A large kitchen. The ceiling and walls are partially covered by draperies and greens. The back wall slants upward from left side of scene. On back wall, left, are two shelves filled with copper kettles, iron casseroles and tin pans. The shelves are trimmed with fancy scalloped paper. To right of middle a large arched entrance with glass doors through which one sees a fountain with a statue of Cupid, syringa bushes in bloom and tall poplars. To left corner of scene a large stove with hood decorated with birch branches. To right, servants' dining table of white pine and a few chairs. On the end of table stands a Japanese jar filled with syringa blossoms. The floor is strewn with juniper branches.

Again, Sir James M. Barrie sets his "The Will" "in any lawyer's office," and Lord Dunsany in his "The Lost Silk Hat," uses only a doorstep.

In devising any scene for his play, the dramatist will do well to aim at impression and at quality. Not only the materials used but also the phrasing employed make one kind of impression or another. Any statement in the set-

ting should be as brief as is consistent with clearness and effectiveness. Too detailed and too prolix scenes serve only to confuse; and too profuse or too involved phrasing is only bewildering. That phrasing which is suggestive and connotative, that which reveals a great deal more than is actually stated, is the kind most suitable for stage settings. The phrasing should arouse the powers of imagination. Mere graces of style, parade of wit, indulgence of a pet philosophy, have no legitimate place in the description of a scene. The existence of any element in a setting is justified only by the fact that it is an organic element in the complete drama. If a scene does not fulfil this requirement, whatever else it may be, it is not a setting for the play.

## CONTEMPORARY ONE-ACT PLAYS

SIR JAMES M. BARRIE

"The Twelve Pound Look," "Pantaloons,"  
"Rosalind," "The Will," all in the volume  
called "Half Hours." "Der Tag."

FENN AND PRICE

"'Op-o'-Me-Thumb."

J. HARTLEY MANNERS

"Happiness," "Just as Well," "The Day of  
Dupes," "The Queen's Messenger."

STUART WALKER

Portmanteau Plays: "The Six Who Pass  
While the Lentils Boil," "Nevertheless," "The  
Medicine Show," "The Trimplet."

WASHINGTON SQUARE PLAYS

"The Clod" by Lewis Beach, "Overtones" by  
Alice Gerstenberg, "Eugenically Speaking"  
by Edward Goodman, "Helena's Husband"  
by Philip Moeller.

JOSEPHINE PRESTON PEABODY

"Fortune and Men's Eyes," "The Wings."

PAUL HERVIEU

"Modesty."

GEORGE MIDDLETON

"Criminals." "Tradition," "On Bail," "Their  
Wife," "Waiting," "The Cheat of Pity,"  
"Mothers," all in one volume; "Possessions,"  
"The Groove," "A Good Woman," "The

## CONTEMPORARY ONE-ACT PLAYS 267

Black Tie," "Circles," "The Unborn," all in one volume; "Embers," "The Failures," "The Gargoyle," "In His House," "Madonna," "The Man Masterful," all in one volume.

OLIPHANT DOWN

"The Maker of Dreams."

LORD DUNSANY

"The Lost Silk Hat," "The Glittering Gate," "The Queen's Enemies," "A Night at an Inn."

HARVARD PLAYS: The 47 Workshop.

"Three Pills in a Bottle" by Rachel Lyman Fields, "The Good Men Do" by Hubert Osborne, "Two Crooks and a Lady" by Eugene Pillot, "Free Speech" by William L. Prosser.

HARVARD PLAYS: The Harvard Dramatic Club.

"The Florist Shop" by Winifred Hawkridge, "The Bank Account" by Howard Brock, "The Rescue" by Rita Creighton Smith, "America Passes By" by Kenneth Andrews.

RICHARD HARDING DAVIS

"Miss Civilization," "Blackmail."

MARION CRAIG WENTWORTH

"War Brides."

G. BERNARD SHAW

"Press Cuttings."

SIR ARTHUR WING PINERO

"Playgoers."

WISCONSIN PLAYS:

First Series: "The Neighbors" by Zona Gale, "In Hospital" by Thomas H. Dickinson, "Glory of the Morning" by William Ellery

## 268 CONTEMPORARY ONE-ACT PLAYS

Leonard. Second Series: "The Feast of the Holy Innocents" by S. Marshall Ilsley, "On the Pier" by Laura Sherry, "The Shadow" by Howard Mumford Jones, "We Live Again" by Thornton Gilman.

ALICE BROWN

"Joint Owners in Spain."

RITA WILLIAMS

"Barbarians."

JOHN GALSWORTHY

"The Little Dream."

ALFRED NOYES

"A Belgian Christmas Eve."

ROBERT H. DAVIS and PERLEY POORE SHEEHAN

"Efficiency."

UTAH PLAYS

"Blue Fog" by Agnes Lovendahl, "A Man of Temperament" by J. Douglas Cook, "Ersatz Marriages" by Vardis Alvero Fisher, "The Grey Switch" by Sarah Keener, "The Cold Grey Dawn" by Athene Farnsworth, "The Spectre" by Sarah Williams.

WILLIAM BUTLER YEATS

"The Hour-Glass," "Cathleen ni Hoolihan," "A Pot of Broth," "The King's Thresh-old."

LADY GREGORY

"The Workhouse Ward," "Hyacinth Halvey," "Spreading the News," "The Gaol Gate," "The Rising of the Moon," "The Travelling Man."

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"Riders to the Sea," "The Tinker's Wedding."

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"Ashes of Roses," "Gretna Green," "Counsel  
Retained," "The Prince of Court Painters."

WELSH PLAYS. Three Welsh Plays by Jean-  
nette Marks: "The Merry, Merry Cuckoo,"  
"The Deacon's Hat," "Welsh Honeymoon."

YIDDISH PLAYS. Six Plays of the Yiddish  
Theatre: "Abigail" and "Forgotten Souls"  
by David Pinski, "She Must Marry a Doc-  
tor" by Solomon J. Rabinowitsch, "Winter"  
and "The Sinner" by Sholom Ash, "In the  
Dark" by Perez Hirschbein.

SEAMUS O'BRIEN

"Duty."

ELIZABETH MCFADDEN

"Why the Chimes Rang."

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Eugene G. O'Neill, "The Game" by Louise  
Bryant, "King Arthur's Socks" by Floyd  
Dell; Second Series: "Suppressed Desires"  
by George Cram Cook and Susan Glaspell;  
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Boyce, "Lima Beans" by Alfred Kreymborg,  
"Before Breakfast" by Eugene G. O'Neill;  
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John Chapin Mosher; Fifth Series: "Co-  
caine" by Pendleton King; Sixth Series:  
"The People" by Susan Glaspell.

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**NEGRO PLAYS.** Plays for a Negro Theatre  
by Ridgely Torrence: "Granny Maumee,"  
"The Rider of Dreams," "Simon the Cyren-  
ian."

**MAURICE MAETERLINCK**  
"The Intruder."

**HUGO VON HOFMANNSTHAL**  
"Electra."

**ARTHUR SCHNITZLER**  
Anatol Plays: "Ask No Questions and You'll  
Hear No Stories," "A Christmas Present,"  
"An Episode," "Keepsakes," "A Farewell  
Supper," "Dying Pangs," "The Wedding  
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**OSCAR WILDE**  
"Salome."

**STANLEY HOUGHTON**  
"The Dear Departed," "The Master of the  
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Fifth Commandment."

**HERMANN SUDERMANN**  
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nal Masculine." Roses: "Streaks of Light,"  
"Margot," "The Last Visit," "The Faraway  
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a Woman for A' That," "A Fan and Two  
Candlesticks," "A Modern Masque," "The  
Futurist," "The Gate of Wishes."

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MARK MAUREY

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FRANÇOIS COPPÉE

"Pater Noster."

ALFRED SUTRO

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Man on the Kerb," "Ella's Apology," "Car-  
rots."



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"The Terrible Meek."

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Morality," "The Beautiful Story," all in one  
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"Chitra."

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